THE LAW DIVINE

E. W. SAVI

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THE LAW DIVINE

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by

E. W. SAVI

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BOOK ONE

LOVE'S PHILOSOPHY

"The fountains mingle with the river,
And the rivers with the ocean;
The winds of heaven mix for ever
With a sweet emotion;
Nothing in the world is single;
All things by a law divine
In one another's being mingle—
Why not I with thine?

See, the mountains kiss high heaven,
And the waves clasp one another;
No sister flower would be forgiven
If it disdained its brother;
And the sunlight clasps the earth,
And the moonbeams kiss the sea—
What are all these kissings worth,
If thou kiss not me?"

—SHELLEY.

CHAPTER I

CONCERNING PERSPECTIVE

I

LITTLE Mrs. Honeywell descended from a taxi in front of a tall, imposing dwelling in South Kensington, paid the driver and rang the door-bell with an abstracted air. Her small, resolute face was troubled, her mouth looked tremulous, for her nerves were not properly under her control. The object of her visit made it impossible for her to feel calm and collected, for she knew her friend, Patricia Donithorne, well enough to be aware that what she had to say was bound to create resentment and, possibly, a breach of their long-standing friendship, which dated back to schooldays.

However, there was no help for it.

Whatever happened, she had to take steps to put an end to what threatened destruction to her most cherished ideals.

Because Patricia Donithorne was in a better position than herself and able to give her chances of entertainment and of mixing with quite charming people, she was not going to barter her principles or jeopardize the future of her child's soul. Whatever some fanatics thought on the subject of child-psychology, her own mind was very definite regarding it, and she meant to uphold her convictions at all costs.

"Is Mrs. Donithorne at home?" she asked the maid who answered the bell.

"Mistress is in her study. Won't you come in?" said the maid, with a good imitation of her employer's manner.

She left Mrs. Honeywell in the drawing-room, every inch of which was familiar to the visitor, and retired.

Mrs. Honeywell was aware that the mistress of the house was immersed in duties connected with the multifarious charities she favoured and in fulfilling others that were social, and that she would probably be vexed at having to receive a caller at the wrong time of the day, but it was always so difficult to get her alone or find her disengaged. Patricia, therefore, would have to make the best of it. Very soon, she would have to agree that her old friend had sound cause for complaint, otherwise betray an astonishing lack of wisdom.

Truly, some women, metaphorically, "fiddled while Rome burned"!

Mrs. Honeywell found her salts bottle at the bottom of her handbag, and removing the cork, sniffed its contents to support her courage, her eyelids blinking nervously.

The room was as dignified as the exterior of the house, lofty and capacious, and furnished in sombre, good taste, with Swiss net shrouding the tall windows, and a Persian carpet of extensive proportions covering the floor. Mrs. Honeywell gasped at the thought of its value, for her late husband had been in the carpet trade, a wholesale merchant in the city, and she could judge that this one must have run into four figures.

Mrs. Donithorne certainly knew how to live up to her husband's position, and in her determination to keep in the limelight of public acknowledgment, was materially furthering his ambitions. As the wife of a Member of Parliament who hoped to gain a knighthood and a Government billet somewhere in or out of

the country, she was not doing badly, for her dinner-parties were famous, and her circle of friends was distinctive and useful.

Through it all, however, she showed her great tact and kind feeling by keeping up her girlhood's friendships, and Mrs. Honeywell had been greatly charmed when she had been made to feel as important a guest under Patricia's roof as the titled ladies whom she entertained at the same time.

Oh, she had no fault to find with Patricia Donithorne's treatment of herself, which made it all the more awkward to pay this visit of protest. It was a thousand pities that this thirst for popularity and greatness should cause her to be so neglectful of the more important things in life! But, it seemed, it was so, for——

"Oh, my dear Pat!" cried Mrs. Honeywell, rising as Mrs. Donithorne entered, "I do hope you'll excuse me for calling at this hour, but I simply had to see you, personally."

"You are very welcome at any time, my dear Grace. Why apologize? It is sometimes good for me to be disturbed. I am inclined to be overworked, with my Girls' Guilds and these various Conservative associations. What with being Secretary to the Society for Housing the Homeless, also the Animal Charities' Association; this meeting and that; accounts to keep —believe me, I am often worn out! Were it not for my husband's secretary, Jasper Noble—such a dear young man!—I should be utterly done. He comes to the rescue and checks my accounts. Such a treasure!"

She made Grace Honeywell sit down and took the chair opposite, a graceful figure in clothes that made her old friend envious. Beside her, Grace felt dowdy and old-fashioned. Patricia had an instinct for dress, and knew exactly what suited her style, and just how far to keep apace with the fashions.

"I hope nothing has gone seriously wrong. How is Petal?"

"Very well indeed. I have had to change her governess."

"Oh, why? I thought the girl so intellectual and refined."

"She might be both, but I found her a little too fond of men. She was in the habit of meeting them outside, which, of course, made it very undesirable, for Petal is old enough to take notice. She was too anxious to be married."

"A very natural ambition. Consider her age!"

"But how demoralizing for my child! One could not tell what she might not be getting to know! And this brings me to the reason for this visit. My dear Pat, have you any idea of the sort of companions Nadia is associating with?"

"Why? What do you mean? Nadia goes to a perfectly good school round the corner to prepare her for Cheltenham. It is kept by the daughters of a retired clergyman of our church. Nadia outgrew governessing and needed companionship and competition. She is a healthy young animal and required somewhere to blow off steam."

"She is Petal's age—nine last birthday, wasn't she?—and is acquiring great precocity for her years. Dear me! Have you any idea what she told Petal yesterday when they were having tea together?" Mrs. Honeywell's colour rose, and she showed signs of agitation. "I wouldn't have believed it, had Petal not come to me with the story. She always tells me what she hears, as I have made that a habit with her, by showing myself sympathetic and companionable towards her, which is the duty of every mother." (This was a subtle thrust at her friend.)

"You alarm me," said Patricia.

"It has always been my ambition, as you know, to keep my child innocent and pure. If possible, I do

not wish her to gain knowledge unsuitable to her age or understanding; for the mind of a growing child is not capable of knowing right from wrong, or of having any judgment by which to balance things and set them in their right perspective. Imagine, therefore, my horror when I was told that Nadia was a witness, in your kitchen, of the birth of Pansy's kittens! Apparently between the hours of schooling, Nadia amuses herself any old how. The cook has been teaching her how to cook, and the result of her visits below stairs has been this shocking spectacle, which occurred when the kitchen-maid tried to drive Pansy out of the broom closet where she had made up her mind to give her kittens. Consequently, a kitten was born in the middle of the kitchen floor! and before the cook became aware of it, Nadia was watching the operation with speechless interest."

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Donithorne, uncomfortably.

"This led to an argument, Petal being informed that Nadia had discovered that, in these matters of nature, animals and human beings were the same. Petal, of course, always believed that babies came direct from God. The nurse brought it in a parcel—or that others were found under a cabbage bush—it's the way I was brought up, and it was good enough at that time of my life. Naturally, Petal is concerned to know the truth, and I have had the most awful time trying to divert her mind."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her, of course, that Nadia did not know what she was talking about, and that she needn't worry her head as she would know everything when grown up. If I were not so sure that Petal was docile and uncurious, I should have been in a fever. But God knows what else Nadia will be filling my child's head with. She has already told Petal that Rita and she have seen the most fearful and wonderful plates in Rita's sister's book, showing babies being born.

Mercifully, Petal is ready to believe that it is all a lie."

"But—how came Nadia and Rita to——"

"Her sister—Rita's, I mean—came home for the week-end, and as she was studying for her final in the medical, she brought a few books home with her, and as Nadia was with Rita for the day, they evidently found a new field on which to exercise their curiosity. Fortunately, Nadia confessed that the long words had no meaning for them, and they could not make out very much, only enough to satisfy them that grown-ups told them a great many lies. Now think of that! You know how I have tried to bring up Petal."

"While granting you every right to make a fool of Petal," said Mrs. Donithorne calmly, "I still maintain that we make a mistake in trying to mystify the minds of children on matters of nature, instead of answering their questions truthfully. You cannot condemn a child for wanting to know things that are made to appear so mysterious. Not to tell the truth is only to drive a child to underhand methods of discovering it, or to give it an element of impropriety that makes it all the more alluring. I must say that I am beginning to see the folly of the old system of dealing with childish minds, and don't mean to subscribe to it."

"Do you mean to say you will not mind Nadia knowing *everything* before she has arrived at an age when knowledge can be tempered with reason and judgment?"

"If you kill curiosity, a child has nothing to bother about, and will turn its mind to other things."

"Indeed! Curiosity can never be killed. There is always more and more to wonder about. From wanting to know things, she will pass to a desire to experience them—I speak of the mysteries of sex."

"What is your idea of the proper age at which your child may be told of the primary facts of life?"

"I should never dream of *telling* her. What she has not instinctively learned by exercising her intelligence, once she is grown up, her husband will be the right person to inform her. To my mind, the modern girl is a holy terror—her sophisticatedness, her freedom! That is why so many girls go wrong. Not content with knowing things, they want to experience what they know. It frightens me, so that I feel one can't be too careful of one's daughters. The old school appreciated that thoroughly."

"The new does away with hypocrisy and camouflage. It is better to let one's daughter learn things from those who can present the truth from the right angle, than let her 'find out' things for herself from those who are not concerned in what manner she is enlightened."

"I cannot agree with you. What is equal to the light of purity and simplicity in the eyes of innocence?"

Mrs. Donithorne laughed a little defiantly. She was defending Nadia though she had scarcely the courage of her convictions.

"Don't confound ignorance with innocence. It is our duty to mark the pitfalls, you know. You can't expect to escape them if you go blindfolded."

"On the other hand, the pitfalls, as you call them, have a way of alluring those even who see them, to their doom."

"I am very sorry for Nadia's frankness. In future, she must not be allowed to spend the day with Petal, whom she is likely to corrupt by her precocity."

"Oh, please don't think I have any ill feeling towards the child, but it is only——"

"Oh, please say no more," said Mrs. Donithorne, smilingly. "I quite understand." Mentally, she registered a reservation to look into the subject of Nadia's occupations and to see what could be done to limit her explorations.

"I don't wish you to take this matter personally,"

said the visitor, earnestly. " Sympathize with my point of view, and if you take my advice, you will caution Nadia not to be too ready to talk of subjects that are not discussed by children."

" The surest way to focus her mind on those very subjects! I shall, at all events, draw her out and see how much she actually knows."

The ladies kissed and parted, having agreed that Nadia would have to learn discretion. Mrs. Honeywell returned home feeling that she had discharged a disagreeable task with tact, and Mrs. Donithorne abandoned her public duties for that day, to consider the problem of her growing child.

On her way home, Mrs. Honeywell bought an expensive doll for Petal as a distraction from undesirable thoughts, and gave herself up for the rest of the day to the business of making her child forget the ugly fact that children were born of their parents. According to Mrs. Honeywell, Life was altogether hideous, and in order to cover up its indecencies, the minds of growing children were to be trained to look the other way.

Petal's dolls were a useful resource in this respect, and served to create a nursery world that made the real one a delusion and a snare. Petal herself was happy in her own world. She adored her mother whose wishes were her law, and responded to her lead of childishness even to the fostering of a lisp. Since to grow up too quickly was evidently improper—Nadia being held up as a lively example—Petal dutifully remained infantile. Nevertheless, she secretly regarded Nadia with profound admiration for her initiative and amazing emancipation; yet obediently consented to the restrictions placed on their friendship, since " mothers always know best."

It was very gratifying to Grace Honeywell, when she retired that night, to feel that her angel child had miraculously escaped contamination by Nadia

Donithorne. In the future, she meant to see to it that the two children were never again left alone together.

The outcome of Mrs. Donithorne's concentration on the subject of Nadia's undoubted precocity was a visit from that lady to the elder daughter of Mrs. Payne, her neighbour. There was certainly no reason why, because she was a medical student, her books should be a source of enlightenment to the minds of the children who visited at her mother's house. Miss Payne struck Mrs. Donithorne as a sensible young lady whose heart was in her profession. Her views were unorthodox, but her arguments carried conviction.

"I know," said she, "that Rita and Nadia got at my medical handbooks and treatises, and I boxed Rita's ears. But there's no harm done. They have only learned something they would sooner or later know that concerns their own bodies. I punished Rita for not asking my permission; but, as she truthfully said, I should have refused it; so she had the better of me there. Next time, I'll be more careful, and lock up my books. I have told her that if she is so anxious to know things, she can ask me and I'll not tell her lies. To my mind, it is more harmful to lie about the simple things of nature than to be frank and tell the truth. I tell Mother that Rita must be told all that there is to know before she goes out into the world to earn her living. After that it will be up to her. No one has any excuse for going wrong if they know themselves inside out and have no illusions concerning the opposite sex."

Mrs. Donithorne looked amazed at this young woman who meant to be a doctor, and she made up her mind to cultivate her acquaintance. She was certainly straightforward and talked sense. When it was time for Nadia to know things, she would like to make her over to Doctor Mary Payne. By that time, she would be fully-fledged in her profession and capable of undertaking the responsible task.

On this occasion, however, she took the opposite side in the argument.

"It seems unnecessary to enlighten young girls on the subject of Life, and to give them a theoretical knowledge of facts concerning the sexes. Isn't it likely to focus their minds on undesirable thoughts and sharpen, instead of allaying, their curiosity?"

"That may be," said Miss Payne, dictatorially. "Without any assistance, their curiosity will do that for them, possibly, to their own hurt. Wisdom, side by side with knowledge, never did harm to anybody."

"That sounds reasonable," said Mrs. Donithorne. "I find it very awkward to speak to my own child on delicate matters, so when Nadia is old enough to hear things unreservedly, I will send her to you."

Miss Payne smiled a superior smile and promised to act advisedly.

Nadia's mother returned home feeling greatly relieved in mind. Modern psychology would probably do a great deal more for children than the past system of teaching them to regard nature with suspicion and treat all that pertained to sex as disgraceful and to be kept out of sight like cancers and festering sores. She began to feel that a great deal more light thrown on the facts of nature, must result in a healthier outlook. She did not know, really, what to think. She was not like Grace Honeyweli, who was bigoted in her opinions on the subject of what young girls ought not to know. She was open to conviction.

II

Anyhow, she tried to see more of her little daughter, and was struck with the alert intelligence of her mind. Bright-eyed Nadia, who was not so beautiful as Petal, had already great promise of charm, and had loving

little ways and coaxing tricks that were irresistible. These she played off on the only male she knew intimately besides her own father—Jasper Noble, his secretary, who had the freedom of his home.

While waiting in expectation of a goodly inheritance, he marked time as Parliamentary Secretary to the Right Honourable Laurence Donithorne, M.P., and when at the house, eased many of Mrs. Donithorne's burdens. He was a quiet, plain, reserved young man whose ambition it had always been to take Holy Orders, but who, in deference to his father's wishes, remained a layman to succeed him as a country gentleman. For generations, the Nobles had been Gentlemen Farmers, and the little property at Basingbrook, in Essex, had repaid good management. At odd times he returned home to understudy his father and acquaint himself with the duties of farming, but he was a devoted friend of the Donithornes, and London drew him, because of its human appeal.

For all her uppish little ways and advanced intelligence, Nadia was a veritable child with Jasper Noble, adoring him openly and inviting his affection. She was his devoted slave, and would give up any engagement to drive with "Bruno"—as she called him—in his two-seater, or spend an afternoon in his society at the Zoo. It gave Mrs. Donithorne a shock to see how familiarly she treated him, and had it not been for the fact that Jasper had her fullest confidence and trust, she might have been nervous of the growing intimacy.

Nadia would seat herself on the young secretary's knee and caress him tenderly. Soft, dewy kisses dropped on his cheek, his lips, were delightfully childish and enchanting, and Noble was often responsive, with a light of genuine affection in his kind, honest eyes.

"Funny little kid!" he would say. "My little Nadikins!"

She loved the pet names and was extravagant in her expressions of admiration and love.

"Isn't he a darling, Mummy?" holding him round the neck and laying her soft cheek to his. "I just adore the way your hair turns up like a cockatoo's crest and won't lie flat"—smoothing it with her fingers. In her eyes he had a beautiful face, which confession often made her parents laugh.

Mrs. Donithorne had grown so used to Nadia's demonstrations of love towards Jasper Noble that she rarely noticed them, but in the light of a new thought, it seemed that a little less of it would be advisable. However, on discussing the matter with her husband, she was reassured. "Don't interfere," said he, "or you'll put ideas into the child's head."

"I was thinking of him."

Donithorne laughed. "You needn't. Jasper is a rarity. You can trust him under all circumstances, blindfold."

The story of Nadia's enlightenment of Petal's mind made her husband shout with laughter. Grace Honeywell he regarded as a fool, and refused to attach any importance to Nadia's budding curiosity, which was as natural to an intelligent child as breathing. Grown-up people wrapped themselves up in a cloud of mystery, so that she was not to be blamed for wishing to pierce through for the truth. "Leave her alone to Nature," he said, his sense of humour tickled. "I dislike all this meddling with a child's psychology. Let it develop naturally, and answer all questions with as few lies as possible. Use your judgment where it is safe to tell the truth or camouflage crude facts. You feed a child according to its digestive capacity; so with knowledge, always remembering that a 'little knowledge is a dangerous thing.' For the rest, teach Nadia the fear of God, and she won't go far wrong."

As the "fear of God" was fast disappearing from modern religious training, and "Love" taking its

place, Mrs. Donithorne, who was astray respecting her own religious beliefs, felt incompetent to deal with the matter. Consequently, Nadia's religion was a nebulous affair.

III

"I wish you would let me sleep with you," Mrs. Donithorne heard her young daughter remark to Jasper Noble while occupying his knee, and she bent over her novel so as not to appear listening. Nadia was the most embarrassing child she knew. Jasper, however, did not seem disturbed.

"I couldn't do that," said he. "You'd kick me out of bed."

"I promise not to—but then, one never can say what one might not do in one's sleep. Never mind, I'll marry you when I grow up, and then you'll let me, like Daddy let's Mummy."

"How do you know that I'll marry you?" said Noble, cuddling the little figure closer.

"Oh, I know you will. I've made up my mind about that."

They argued playfully till Nadia, being sleepy, fell asleep and Jasper read his paper.

It was the hour before dinner when Nadia was allowed to come down in her nightie for a little family life and divide her attentions between her father and Jasper. To-day, she had Jasper to herself.

"Why let her trouble you?" said Mrs. Donithorne. "Let me ring for my maid"—as Nadia had no nurse. After a few scenes with nurses and governesses who had failed to manage the high-spirited girl, Mrs. Donithorne had decided to make Nadia independent.

"Don't ring," said he. "I'll take her up to bed myself."

As he had often done it, Mrs. Donithorne made no

objection, and saw Jasper carry the diminutive form in his arms upstairs to her bed.

"She's one of God's own angels," he said, on his return, a look of reverence in his eyes. Needless to say, Nadia's parent held quite the opposite opinion, knowing her own daughter's temper well.

Mrs. Donithorne made up her mind to leave Nadia alone. In a couple of years she would be sent to a boarding-school, and finally to Cheltenham, so all that was necessary was to give her plenty of occupation for her mind and govern her friendships. Since Grace Honeywell had such stringent views on the training of girls, Nadia should not be allowed to spend the day with Petal again.

Only once was she embarrassed and at a loss for a reply, when Nadia was assisting her to pack a parcel for the homeless ones on the Donithorne list of charities.

"Now don't mix things up!" said her mother, irritably, as Nadia's interest in the little garments made her keep folding and unfolding them.

"I won't muddle," said Nadia. "I suppose these panties are to go with the boys' other stuff? Now what a pity there are boys *and* girls. What a saving of trouble if there were only boys or only girls! Then there would be only one sort for the parcel," she prattled along. "I wonder if I should have liked being a boy or a girl? I think I like being a girl, for girls get babies, not boys. What are boys for, anyway?"

"Fetch me some string," said her mother. "You'll find it on the table."

"I'd say 'please,' if I was you. *I* always have to say it."

"Please, dear."

Nadia fetched the string and returned to the charge.

"It has often made me wonder, this reason for girls and boys being different. Why has it to be, Mums?"

"What do you mean by different?" frowned Mrs. Donithorne. Truly, Nadia did ask odd questions!

" They are different, you know that."

" Are they? " Mrs. Donithorne looked around for nspiration, hoping to pounce on something that would create a diversion.

" I thought you would have noticed it," said Nadia, unperturbed. " Yesterday, at Elsie's "—another of her juvenile neighbours—" I watched the nurse bathing the baby-boy, such a fat darling, and I thought you would be able to tell me why there should be boys *and* girls, and not all alike."

Mrs. Donithorne was at a loss how to reply without snubbing her daughter, so found herself resorting to Grace Honeywell's tactics :

" Children have to have daddies and mummies. If you had only mummies, who's going to earn the money for the mummy to keep the home? "

" I've heard that it takes ' all sorts to make a world,' " said Nadia. " Then why shouldn't the daddies take a turn at having babies. I overheard cook telling Isabel, while she was rolling the pastry, that ' women didn't oughter have all the pain and men all the pleasure out of being married.' She was saying how her sister nearly died getting her first baby last year, and Isabel said that if it could be ' turn about,' and the man was the first to get a baby, ' there never would be no more than two in every family.' I thought about it a lot, but couldn't make it out. Can you? How did she make that calculation? "

Mrs. Donithorne compressed her lips to suppress a smile. There was no doubt about it that Nadia would be best sent to boarding-school.

" You make me tired, Nadia. Stop worrying your head with ' whys ' and ' wherefores.' Children have nothing to do with such matters. When you are grown up, you'll understand everything."

" I almost understand everything now. Perhaps Bruno will be able to tell me."

" I forbid you to speak of such matters to Jasper.

You must know that there are some things we don't talk to men about! "

"But Bruno is not like other men," said Nadia, pouting.

"If you become troublesome, I'll have to send you to boarding-school."

"I shall love that! Do send me to boarding-school!" Nadia pleaded. "There'll be such heaps of girls and such fun. The only thing I won't like, will be having to do without Bruno," she added, in sudden gravity.

"You mean you'll only miss Jasper and nobody else?"

"I'll miss you and Daddy, too. But—Bruno is very special. When you have made up your mind to marry anyone, he should be special, shouldn't he?"

"You are a very silly child," said her mother, snubbingly.

IV

Interest in Nadia's early childhood next centres in an episode of slight importance but which, nevertheless, belongs to the story and might as well be recorded. It occurred when the girl had reached fourteen and was attracting considerable attention in the Donithornes' circle of acquaintance. Slight changes had taken place. Mr. Donithorne's hopes of a Government appointment were no nearer fulfilment since a Labour Government had come into power; still, he was undaunted, being convinced that the Conservatives would yet come in on the rebound of public opinion which was showing dissatisfaction with the foreign policy of the party in power.

Jasper Noble had lost his father and was now the master of Basingbrook. He was in no sense a rich man, the estate having recently become encumbered with mortgages and the farm needing skilful manage-

ment to make it pay. He was still a valued friend of the Donithornes and a favourite with Nadia, who paid periodical visits to her home when school broke up for vacations. When her parents could not have her, she would go to the farm on a visit to Jasper's mother, and run wild over the countryside with a boy a few years older than herself, the son of the vicar in the town, whose passion for climbing trees, robbing orchards and playing football, bid fair to turn Nadia into a young hooligan.

Nadia was at home for Christmas, with the prospect of one more year at school, after which she was to be sent to Cheltenham, and her affairs occupied a great deal of attention in the family, even becoming the subject of conversation at a dinner-party on Christmas Eve in her parents' house.

Jasper was present with Dr. Mary Payne on his right hand. A bishop sat in the seat of honour beside the hostess, his " lady " on Mr. Donithorne's right, while down the length of the table, which was a vision of refinement and art, were a dozen other intimate friends who were always pleased to accept an invitation to dine at the great slip of a house in South Kensington.

Dr. Mary Payne, who had a promising practice in the West End, had not allowed Mrs. Donithorne's interest in her to flag since the day of their conversation concerning Nadia's mental development and its proper treatment. She was a tall woman with an aquiline nose and thin lips, who was known to yield to no one's opinions, and who won her way by sheer belief in herself. She had taken life in her two hands and sifted it to the core, found it good in parts, and decided that it only remained for her to marry, for her to have plumbed the depths of knowledge and emotions. Theoretically, marriage had no right to be a failure if people would only learn the secret of matrimonial give and take. She believed that she had sensed it, and was fully determined to preach the gospel of frankness to parents who

had children to rear. If, according to Dr. Mary Payne, girls and boys knew more about themselves and each other, when it came to embarking on matrimonial seas, they would never meet with shipwreck. All that was wanted by them was *knowledge*, which was the "beginning of *wisdom*."

"I don't know that I can fully endorse that," said Jasper, who was theorizing with her while looking after her needs. "Let me give you walnuts?"

"Thank you. But why do you disagree?"

"Because in the course of my experience, knowledge does not always bring wisdom. The wise make use of knowledge, fools come to grief over it."

"I have no use for fools. Do you see that lady opposite?" She indicated a little woman with eyes that conveyed the idea that the world was so full of corruption, she did not know whom to trust.

"I have met her a few times. She's Mrs. Honeywell, a widow with a little girl, Nadia's age."

"That's so. She made an unfortunate marriage—at least, they never got on, so that it was a merciful release for her when he died. I could imagine that she must have been very untactful and stupid in her dealings with him. I was called in one day to attend to her child—Petal, she is called, I suppose because she has a skin like rose leaves. It was nothing serious, but in the course of my visits I learned how narrow-minded the woman is. She is so afraid of corrupting her child's mind, that she is doing her best to pervert it."

"I believe, she overdoes things rather."

"I have not seen Nadia for some time. How is she coming on?"

"Nadia is a character," said Jasper. "The most honest kid I know. If she is not interfered with, or allowed to grow up in her own way, she'll be splendid. I only fear that lack of understanding will make those who have the handling of her, spoil things hopelessly."

"What do you most fear?"

" Unnatural measures. She has a high spirit, heaps of initiative, and a wonderful imagination. What she needs is to be taught the Ten Commandments thoroughly, and left to apply them to her daily life."

" They need modifying if you would use them as a guide to conduct."

" I'd leave that to common sense. Nadia should have plenty if she develops naturally."

" How can she develop *un*naturally? "

" Nothing easier," said Jasper, who was aware of Dr. Mary Payne's theories on modern child-psychology. " Psycho-analysis, such as some people go all out for, is likely to give a growing child a diseased imagination; develop ideas best left alone, and atrophy others necessary to plain, honest living. Too much introspection is bad, in my humble opinion, for unformed minds."

" Don't you think it helps, rather, to form them? " said Dr. Mary, with a patronizing air.

" Yes. Too often in the wrong direction."

They could not say more, for it was apparent that the guests were clamouring for Nadia. Mrs. Donithorne said that Nadia had probably gone to bed. If not asleep, she could come down just to say " how d'you do."

" She's such a little monkey," said her father, " she's best in bed, if you ask me. I never saw such a child for cheek. She's all the aplomb of her mother, and looks a babe."

" I dislike forward children," murmured Mrs. Honeywell to a neighbour. " Nadia behaves as if nothing in the world could put her out."

One or two present who had never seen Nadia, pleaded to have her sent for. Accordingly, Mrs. Donithorne whispered to one of the servants, and it was understood that the girl would shortly appear.

Not many minutes afterwards, when Mrs. Donithorne

was in conversation with the bishop, Nadia arrived looking no more than ten years old—a slip of a child in a flowered kimono of her mother's, which trailed behind her—her dark eyes dancing merrily.

"I hope you don't mind, Mummy. I borrowed your dressing-gown as mine looks so shabby, and short, that my pi-jams stick out underneath."

"Nadia! You could have dressed!" said her shocked mother. "Go back."

"Oh, let her remain!" cried a chorus of enchanted guests, all of whom proceeded to make a fuss over the sparkling little creature who was all eyes and rosy cheeks.

"Oh, well!" Mrs. Donithorne exclaimed, shrugging her shoulders and giving way as the bishop was smiling indulgently and his wife looked captivated. She had longed all her life for children, so had a sympathy for all childhood.

"So sporting of you to let me come," said Nadia, slipping an arm round her dad's neck. "I adore nuts."

She was immediately provided with a few, and was passed from one guest to another, with each of whom she had a sparring match, till she came to her beloved Jasper, and refused to go farther.

"Insufferable!" whispered Mrs. Honeywell, wondering how any parent could be so unwise as to allow her child such liberty—and the impropriety of her garb at a dinner-party was scandalous.

"The sweetest thing ever!" cried a gushing young woman to her neighbour.

"She's going to turn a few heads some day," remarked a thoughtful male.

"How's Rita?" Nadia asked Dr. Mary Payne.

"She's getting on splendidly. Took honours in music."

"I wish she was in my school. Why can't she come to it?"

Dr. Mary did not like to say that it was too expensive a school for her mother's means.

" She is very happy where she is. You must come and play with her," she remarked.

" Is she going to be a doctor, too? "

" No, she has no vocation. She'll take music. What will you do when you leave school? "

Nadia slipped an arm round Jasper's neck and said promptly, " I shall marry Bruno. There isn't any sense having a profession if I am to be a wife! "

" Oh, dear! " said the lady on the other side of Jasper. " She's giving away secrets! "

" Oh, no," said Jasper, peeling an orange, " Nadia has been publishing it from the house-tops ever since she was nine."

" You'll ask me to the wedding, Nadia? " said Dr. Mary, amused.

" Of course." Nadia then proceeded to describe the grandeur of the event as planned in her imagination. A dozen bridesmaids and ushers, and a bevy of flower-girls strewing her path with roses.

" Nadia! " said her mother's voice. " You let your tongue run away with you."

" Then give me those fondants, Bruno darling. If I may not talk I had better fill my mouth so full that I shall not be tempted to open it."

While Nadia munched chocolates, someone asked a conundrum and answers flew at him from different parts of the table. A burst of laughter greeted the solution, after which another was offered and puzzled over, till the answer was called for, and a fresh burst of laughter provoked.

In the silence that fell immediately upon the noise, as so often happens, Nadia's reedy voice was heard:

" I know a conundrum and will give it to you if you all promise to laugh. May I? "

" Yes, certainly," said her dad, beaming on her.

He was so proud of her lack of self-consciousness and charm, that he was glad to feel she had made an impression on his guests.

" You may not see the joke, like me, but it is usual for everyone to laugh, anyway. They all did where I heard it."

" Get on with it," said Jasper.

" What jazz tune does a highlander remind you of in winter? "

Silence, during which the company tried hard to find the suitable answer.

" Do you give it up? " her clear voice asked with childish impatience at being kept waiting.

" Wait a moment," said Jasper.

" We give it up," said Mrs. Donithorne, who disliked bringing her daughter into prominence, knowing as she did how many people disapproved of drawing children out and making them assertive. Grace Honeywell, for instance, looked bored and unsympathetic.

" All give it up? " asked Nadia, reaching for another walnut from Jasper's plate and cracking it with her firm, white teeth.

" Let's have it," came generally.

" ' Chilli bom-bom,' " said Nadia triumphantly, in expectation of a burst of laughter. As nobody laughed, and her mother looked scarlet, her father stern, she turned to Jasper for explanation. He, too, appeared absorbed in his occupation of picking nuts on his plate. On every face was either suppressed amusement or embarrassment.

" Dear me! " said the bishop, with a vacuous smile, breaking the silence that was becoming painful. " Where did she get that? "

" One of the girls' brothers told it at a picnic," said Nadia. " What's wrong about it? "

Mrs. Donithorne gave the signal and the ladies rose, the gentlemen with them, drawing back their chairs and

making the way clear as they left the table. The noise was a welcome relief.

" Go to your room, Nadia," said her mother, from the doorway. " Get straight away to bed."

" I know I am in hot water," said she, to Jasper, " but the Lord knows why. Now, do tell me."

" I wouldn't disobey orders," said Jasper. " Right about face ! "

" Tell me to-morrow," she whispered, kissing Jasper on the cheek.

V

Grace Honeywell was more than ever convinced that Nadia was no fit companion for her angel child, and breathed a sigh of thanksgiving that boarding-schools swallowed up imps like the Donithorne kid for most months in the year.

Nadia was more or less in disgrace after that evening, but beyond the fact elicited from Jasper that the joke was vulgar and not supposed to be asked in polite society, she could never understand the extent of her enormity.

" Are you angry with me also, Bruno ? " she asked, the night before she left for the new term. He had called to say good-bye, knowing that it would be months before he saw her again, and was sent up to her room as Nadia had gone to bed.

Nadia, in fanciful pyjamas, snuggled into his arms and wept copiously. Somehow, all the world might be angry with her, but not Jasper !

" What makes you think so, my Bunny-rabbit ? " hugging her to him.

" Because you have not been near us for a week, and now I am going back to school."

"Why should I be angry?" he asked, mystified.

"Because of—that dinner-party and my asking that con—undrum." (Sob.)

"Gracious!—I had forgotten all about it. No, Nadikins. I was only very busy, that's all."

"And I've been breaking my heart about it, thinking you wouldn't love me any more!"

"Now, that's stupid. Don't you ever run away with such an idea again," he said, with sudden gravity. "Don't you believe I love you?—and when people love as I love my Nadikins, they can't stop loving for any reason in the world. Just keep that thought in your funny little head. Now kiss me good-bye and go to sleep. You'll write to me as always?"

"I love writing to you, Bruno, and your letters are my greatest solace," she sighed. "How the girls envy me you!"

"Then you share my letters with the girls?"

"Only with those that I like. I am so proud of you, Bruno, I just can't keep you all to myself. I have to make them jealous. Do you mind?"

"Not in the least!" He laughed, then bent and kissed the velvet cheek. "I wish you could remain a kiddie always—just like this," he said, with a sigh. "Not grow up into a young lady with ideas in your head and grown-up manners!"

"Don't you ever miss me when I am away?" she asked, tracing the outline of his lips with a dainty forefinger.

"Don't *I*?" said he, kissing the finger, while his arms involuntarily tightened about her. The charm of Nadia was indescribable, and a queer thrill quickened the beating of his heart. What was he dreaming of? Falling in love with the kid he had petted since she was nine years old? There was nothing strange about it, for the little witch had stolen his heart right enough. Soon she would be a woman, and then——

What then?

Could he hold her to her childish promises to marry him when she grew up?

It was outrageous nonsense, and the less he continued this sort of folly the better for his own peace of mind. Nadia would grow up soon enough. In a few years she would be of a marriageable age, when she would not lack for offers of marriage, and her people would look higher for her than Jasper Noble, the Gentleman Farmer! Moreover, Nadia's own outlook would change. She would love him always, but love someone else more.

He was at least fifteen years older than his little Nadikins!

Fifteen years!

"What will you do, Bruno, when I am not here to love you so much?" she asked, drawing his cheek to hers.

"I'll think of you—think of you turning into a beautiful woman; and of the day you will turn the heads of all the fellows, making them think you the most wonderful girl in the world," said he, injudiciously.

"Shall I be wonderful?"

"You will, certainly, if you keep your loving heart and kind nature; and if you are as good as you are lovely." He was in the mood to be injudicious because of the queer ache at his heart.

"It must be grand to fascinate people, like Mary Queen of Scots!" she cried, with luminous eyes. "I hope I will be a success when I am big."

"No one can be a success, however beautiful, unless also charming. Remember that. Now I must go. There'll be dinner presently, and I haven't changed!" He hugged her to him, kissed her lovingly, and returned her to the pillows; then vanished from the room, taking with him the memory of the flushed, tearful face which was not strictly beautiful, but the most winsome he knew in the world. Those lustrous

eyes, darkly fringed, and that adorable mouth would give her lovers by the score.

Whatever happened, this little human flower, fragrant and sweet, was, at this stage of her life, his to love and caress. She homed to his arms naturally. He counted far more to her than even her parents. Was it beyond the bounds of possibility that she would keep him in her heart in the coming years, and nurse her love till it became the one grand passion of her life? His modesty made it seem impossible. Yet——

Who could look into the future or tell what was in store?

CHAPTER II

THE VOICE OF NATURE

I

THAT winter, with a change of Government, Mr. Donithorne received his coveted distinction. Chosen for his tact and powers of organization, he was appointed Governor of a distant colony, and knighted. Mrs. Donithorne was so proud of his success that her ambitions immediately soared. As Lady Donithorne, she became a personage, her manner a very perfect imitation of Queen Mary's, and had less time than ever to devote to the study of her child. Fortunately, she felt she could rely on Dr. Mary Payne to pilot her daughter through the anxious time of adolescence, and on Jasper Noble, the family friend, to guard and care for her in her holidays.

The latter was made Nadia's guardian with full discretionary powers over all that pertained to her welfare, and as his mother lived with him, it was arranged that the child should spend all her holidays at the farm. Sir Laurence Donithorne did not expect to relinquish office under three years, although it was possible that he would come home sooner if the climate did not agree with him, and his wife thought that she should be at his side. It appealed strongly to her to be a great lady hedged around with official etiquette; to enjoy, vicariously, all the dignity of office, to be looked up to by the English residents, and to be flattered and fawned upon. To have missed this chance was

inconceivable. All her married life she had dreamed of such a triumph and could not bear to forgo it.

Moreover, a wife's place was beside her husband.

Thus it came to pass that Nadia, when at home one week-end in spring to say good-bye to her mother, who was about to join her father in the East, was allowed to have tea with Rita, so that Dr. Mary Payne might draw her out in the privacy of her own room and tell her all that it was right, according to modern psychology, for a girl of her age to know.

"How old is she, Lady Donithorne?" Dr. Mary had asked when she heard that Nadia was to be left in England while her parents were in India.

"She has just turned fifteen."

"And you are going away without putting her wise regarding the things she ought to know?"

"Oh, my dear Dr. Mary, I could not talk to my child of delicate matters. I shouldn't know which way to look. If you think it right and proper that she should not remain ignorant, why then, I leave her to your discretion."

So Dr. Mary Payne had her way, and poured into the astonished ears of Nadia secrets that generations had withheld from the ears of innocence out of tender reverence for youth. Timid questions brought forth scientific facts she had not dreamed of, shrinking interest drew out wonders of physiology that made her eyelids fall to hide her thrilled amazement.

Dr. Mary was on her hobby-horse when allowed to lecture on sex and its mysteries which appealed more to her than the whole of medical science. It was the most enthralling subject in the world to the lady, and Nadia drank in her words as a babe its mother's milk. The only thing she neglected to do was to teach Nadia the value of honour and self-control. Being herself a disciple of Free Love, it was impossible for her to do other than place, unconsciously, a heavy bias on licentiousness. From instructing her listener on the

things she "ought to know," Dr. Mary passed on to subjects useful alone to married lovers. It was concerning Nature, therefore Nadia was welcome to all the knowledge she could glean. In the end, it sounded somewhat futile when she warned Nadia to go warily through life, for a girl had to remember that she had her reputation to guard, when experience had shown her already that temptations there were, for which girls have cheerfully risked more than their reputations.

Nadia had never in her life heard such astonishing things, and was stirred to the depths of her being. She returned to school feeling years older than when she had left it, and far above the heads of her class-mates in the knowledge of life. It was only her natural sense of refinement that prevented her from confiding all her fearful and wonderful discoveries to her companions. In bewildered fashion, she reconstructed all her preconceived ideas, and found herself glowing inwardly when her thoughts harked back to Dr. Mary's disclosures. Sex-consciousness, prematurely aroused when nature in her was in the adolescent period, made Nadia nervous and highly-strung. She did not know why she was at times irritable and inclined to cry, when not normally given to tears, or why she had become restless and intolerant of her companions.

It was, in the end, a relief when the long summer holidays arrived and she was made over at Victoria to Jasper Noble, her guardian.

Nadia found a great many things changed. A man's look of admiration stirred strange feelings within her, making her colour come and go. Formerly it had amused her. Contact with masculine coat-sleeves, the touch of a man's hand, caused electric shocks. When with Jasper, she was less conversational, but infinitely more loving. She wanted nothing so much as his arms about her, his kisses, and her new shyness made her infinitely disturbing to his established calm. He sensed something alarming, and wondered if it meant that

Nadia was growing up too fast; yet her youth and slim boyishness showed her age. He was used to her arms round his neck, her lips on his cheek, and should have taken these things as a matter of course, but Nadia was all at once magnetic and a new influence radiated from her. She demanded love as the flowers demanded sunshine, and he was frightened.

Frightened for her; and for the first time in his life, he distrusted himself; so, for her sake, he found a great deal to do away from home, and was grateful for his mother's presence and protection.

Nadia was desperately disappointed when she found that she could not see as much of Jasper as she wanted. He was busy. The improvements on the farm required his personal supervision. He had too many outside interests, and she was jealous.

She told him so, and he laughed at her—rather a hollow laugh, but she was hurt. Then he made indifferent amends. Patted her on the head, and said she was not to mind about him. As if she could help minding when she wanted to be petted and made a fuss of, like before.

"I am afraid you are very dull," said Mrs. Noble, kindly. "I wish we could find a girl for you to play with."

"I hate girls," said Nadia. "They are so stupid."

"What about Wylber Young? I met the Vicar this morning and he said that the boy is at home. He has finished with Charterhouse, and will be going to Cambridge shortly. It's vacation time, just now."

Nadia's eyes brightened. She and Wylber used to get along splendidly. He had hated girls till he got to know her, and then liked her because she was a "sport."

"I'd like to see him again," she cried, with interest.

"Then I'll ask him to come along and amuse you. Incidentally, he will amuse himself, as he's the fifth

wheel in a coach at home, for his sisters are both engaged and he's terribly in the way."

Mrs. Noble had a very soft corner in her heart for Wylber Young, whom she had taken in her arms at birth and, since, godmothered. He was an only son where there were two daughters, and consequently, the apple of his mother's eye. The Vicar had great hopes of him, and Wylber idolized his father. Generally, the son of a parson was supposed to be a rascal, but Wylber was a healthy-minded boy of normal instincts and singularly free of petty vices.

The trouble was, would he care to run around with a girl? thought Mrs. Noble, doubtfully. Boys of eighteen were so full of themselves and all they were going to be, that he might be just a little bored. However, it always did boys and girls good to make sacrifices to each other. Nadia would have someone nearer her age, and Wylber would give her a happy time. They could fish and play tennis or golf, most of the day. Outdoor games were so healthy for young people.

They met one afternoon at tea.

"I hope you've not turned into a prig since I last saw you," said Nadia loftily, for Wylber was "only a boy," and she was at an age that admired men. But the boy was astonishingly handsome, and grown so big and manly, that she found herself looking at him with pleasure in his appearance.

"What is your definition of a prig?" said he, his blue eyes twinkling.

"Someone who thinks he's IT. I have no earthly use for that sort."

"I certainly don't think I am a tin god, and am quite willing to be amused if you'll take the trouble."

"I like that! Why not, for a change, trouble yourself to amuse me? I'm bored stiff, I can tell you. Fed up isn't the word. How would you feel if you had to lie about reading all day when the sun is shining

and the birds singing, and everything is saying ' Come out and play ' ? "

" Well, then, come out and play! I'll give you fifteen in every game and see if I can't beat you."

For the next few days they played tennis, then tiring of tennis, went fishing. Nadia knew nothing of fishing, and was delighted. Very gradually, her feminine airs and graces asserted themselves, and the boy grew chivalrous and polite. The first time he helped her over a rough bit of ground, both grew self-conscious. After that, he took every opportunity to repeat the experiment of holding her hand. Once they sat on a style, and Nadia took his, to tell his fortune. This Wylber enjoyed so much that he wanted the other hand told. It did not matter that it was all made up out of her head, with impudence and mischief, to provoke and tease. That made all the charm of it, and an increasing intimacy.

" You are not a bit like other girls," he confided to her with admiration in his eyes, and she was glad to hear it.

When they sat on the bank of the little river, fishing was the last idea in their heads, for they talked all the time, then abandoned the pastime as slow and lay about in the shade talking—talking. What they found to talk about can be gauged by the following dialogue :

" I—I usedn't to like girls much," said he, lying on his back, his head cupped in his hands, his eyes on the clouds floating overhead.

" And I thought boys so dull ! "

" Do you think that now ? " turning to look at her as she plucked at the blades of grass and gathered them in her lap. She was a provoking little thing, with her laughing mouth and starry eyes. Her hat lay on the ground beside her and her hair was the most wonderful shade of red-brown he had ever seen.

" I wouldn't waste a minute with you if I thought

that now! " sending a shower of green blades of grass at him.

" Don't do it! " he remonstrated, in a tone that meant he hoped she would repeat the impertinence, instantly; which, of course, she did, only to have her hand imprisoned and held.

" You've the prettiest hands I've seen. Belle's are inclined to be red because of housework, and Katie gets chilblains that make her fingers thick. But yours are as pretty as——"

" What? " because he hesitated.

" As yourself," said he, with a blush.

" What a lie. I am not at all pretty! "

" You are, and you know it."

" I'm not. My nose turns up at the tip."

" I like it like that. It's ' devil-may-care.' It's saucy like yourself, and adventurous. Girls with noses that turn down are stodgy, and those with straight ones are silly."

" I hate pretty boys! " looking at him impudently.

" What do you mean by that? I hope you don't imply that I am anything so abominable."

" You've a face for a film star," and she grimaced.

" I didn't make my face. Does it mean that you hate me? " anxiously.

Nadia, who adored beauty in any shape and form, shrugged her shoulders contemptuously. Then relenting, smiled divinely at him.

" I—I don't think it matters, for I like you, anyway. I am so happy. Aren't you? "

" The days can't be too long for me! " said he, shyly, blushing furiously. " It will be ghastly when the vacation ends."

" I was thinking that, too. Fancy having to go back to school and lessons! "

" We've got to make the most of our time. Can't

you come out a little earlier to-morrow? And can't we go picnics without having to return for luncheon? I'll bring the eats."

"No, I will. Mrs. Noble will let me have anything I want."

"She's a sport!"

"So different from anyone else that's old."

For a week or two, Nadia coquetted with her companion, thrilled to discover that he was becoming enslaved. She even wondered if, one day, he would think of trying to kiss her. The anticipation of the prospect made her unconsciously more than ever alluring and provocative.

Gradually the old order was changing. The boyish camaraderie had vanished, and in its place came awkward silences, stolen glances, a tendency towards physical contact. If hands met by accident, both became aware of animal magnetism. Every opportunity was taken to repeat the experiment, and a deep excitement attended every excursion they took together, because these subtleties appealed so intensely to both.

Innocent enough, but nothing stands still.

The Youngs knew that Wylber was often at the Manor House as a companion to Nadia, and saw no reason to object, believing that the "children" were under Mrs. Noble's eye. Sometimes, Wylber brought her to tea at the Vicarage. It was not necessary for them to be watched as though they were untrustworthy, so nothing was said. Mrs. Noble alone knew of the picnics every day, and the pleasure the companionship gave to the young pair. To her who thought no evil and had a broad sympathy for youth, it was the most delightful friendship—so free, so innocent! Two young people of decent families, nicely brought up, were best allowed complete freedom. The very confidence she reposed in them, she believed, was character-building.

Human nature, however, has a way of disappointing faith and trust, and opportunity makes the thief.

While she explained again and again to Jasper that the " children " were leading a healthy, open-air life, so good for their lungs and morals, Wylber was beginning to awaken to new and strange emotions under the influence of sex attraction. The girl he companioned was, unconsciously, a witch, with fire in her dark eyes, and honey on her lips. Her smile quickened his pulses; her touch made his heart beat heavily. When once he carried her over a marshy bit of field, her virile body pressed close made him tremble from head to foot. She had a way of haunting his dreams, of making him forget every duty while dwelling on the piquant things she said, the little way of her, whenever she ran, or skipped, or teased, or pouted.

He forgot that his father, whom he loved dearly, was missing his companionship sorely. The doctors had confined him to his room because he was found to have a bad heart. How bad, Wylber was not told. But his father was often breathless after the slightest exertion and needed a strong pair of arms to do little offices for him in the room: only, his boy was forever out.

" Where does he go? " the Vicar asked, beginning to feel neglected. After all, a son had to remember to whom he owed everything and do his little best to pay that debt in service. It had always been a service of love. Now Wylber was all impatience to get away. He took a fishing-rod with him. But did anyone ever see him bring home fish?

" Wylber's chasing about the countryside with the Donithorne kid—a schoolgirl of fifteen," said Wylber's sister Bella tolerantly. She thought it very natural that the boy at his age should begin to get " soft " about girls; and it did him no harm, but taught him chivalry.

" Wylber never cared for the society of girls. This is something new."

" Boys go through phases. This is one of them."

" But, every day? Doesn't he mean to spend *one* day at home? "

" He spends most of his evenings at home," said Wylber's mother. " We can't be too hard on a boy. Unfortunately, his chum, with whom he always went around in the holidays, is abroad with his people, so Wylber it at a loose end."

" Oh, well—I hope he'll not get unsettled for work," said the Vicar. " A great deal depends on Wylber, if he only knows it. Unfortunately, he thinks more of rugger than mathematics, and doesn't seem to realize his position, and that there will be nothing for him if anything happens to me. His education has taken everything I had."

" Don't worry," said his wife. " Wylber's heart is in the right place, and he'll work once he gets to Cambridge, never fear."

II

Nadia had never been so happy in her life. Wylber entirely took the place of Jasper, so that she ceased to want to snuggle into her guardian's arms and be petted. Jasper spent the long evenings at home, wondering a little at the glow in the girl's eyes, her ready laughter, her fascinating ways, feeling that she was consoled. What she had wanted was someone to play with, to take her out of herself. He only hoped that Wylber Young was the right sort of companion, the lad his mother believed him to be.

" How do you like Wylber? " he asked Nadia, while teaching her a new patience.

" I like him," said Nadia, more indifferently than

was natural, the colour coming into her cheek. "He's quite good fun."

Jasper did not like the blush, nor the evasion, but he felt rather helpless. His mother had allowed the friendship, confident that it was all right, and any interference on his part would only breed ill-feeling. He shrank from making Nadia regard him as a stern guardian—a gaoler; he did not wish to be arbitrary, as there was no real reason for him to think that there was any harm in letting the boy and girl play about together in the open air. Older heads were apt to think evil too readily of things that were entirely innocent.

The open air, as a matter of fact, took the two young creatures who were on the threshold of life, into Nature's heart, where it was natural to be in sympathy with the birds, beasts, and flowers; to turn to each other for completeness—little dreaming they were doing so; but every smile, and touch, and wooing glance was bringing them nearer together in a wonderful intimacy of mutual understanding.

One day as they lay on a bank talking in snatches—for the fact of being together alone, a mile from home, sheltered by a tangled blackberry hedge, and shaded by a drooping maple, was sufficient to breed pulsing silences—Wylber asked her what he had been longing to ask for days:

"I say, have you ever been kissed by a fellow?"

"What a question!" she retorted, with a laugh. "I have been kissed by Jasper Noble ever since I was nine years old."

"Oh, him! I'm not thinking of him—he's old. I mean, chaps like me."

"I have never met any except at parties where there hasn't been any kissing. What about you?"

"I've never kissed anyone but my sisters in my life. I say—what would you say if—if I kissed you?" His face had drawn near to hers, and the hunger in his eyes could not be mistaken.

Nadia knew that Wylber had been playing for days with the thought of kissing her, till he could no longer abstain. But she was not one to be prodigal with her gifts. Kissing was something very special, she knew, by the knowledge prematurely engrafted in her. She had wondered about this kissing—the impulse that bred the desire—till she had trembled at the thought of what kisses might mean. She trembled now, and could not meet his eyes, yet temporized while every throb of her heart was capitulation.

"Why should you kiss me?"

"I dunno. I want to, like blazes! I just *must*. Nadia!" His face drew even nearer. "Wouldn't you like me to?" he whispered, though only a caterpillar on a weed could hear, or a squirrel peeping from a hole in the tree.

Nadia made no reply, but the look she shot sideways at him between dark lashes, that only partially hid the invitation of her eyes, brought his lips to hers with sudden fire.

He kissed her once, then withdrew, shocked at the emotions the act had awakened.

Nadia's soft mouth yielding to his was a revelation.

Silence prevailed for a while, till Wylber could endure separation no longer. With such entrancing possibilities as kisses from Nadia existing, could he resist?

He bent forward and removed Nadia's two hands from her face.

"Why?—why?" he questioned her. "Don't you like it?"

To assure himself that she did, he repeated the operation with greater deliberation, his face flushed, his eyes glowing.

"Nadia!" he gasped. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Nadia said nothing, but her silence was encouragement, and the ecstasy of the moments that followed was unparalleled.

An amazing thing, this contact of two pairs of lips! two hearts beating in unison, and nature within crying out for more—more.

It was also alarming.

Nadia sat up, wondering how long Wylber meant it to continue. He had kissed her at least a hundred times, and seemed ready to continue indefinitely. Yet neither had said, "I love you."

"You and I are very silly," said she, pink with embarrassment and considerably breathless.

"I don't believe you think it for a minute," said he, clinging to her hands. "I'm daft about you. I know that I shall count the hours till I see you again. Don't you feel the same? Say you do, Nadia!"

"I suppose I do. But I am going home. See, the sun is setting."

She would not listen to his pleading for just one more, but picked herself up and ran home like a hare. She knew he would be round for her as usual in the morning, and felt that it was better to make him mad for more, than to give him as much of her kisses as he wanted. It was the feminine instinct to lure.

The sun had set, and there were dark shadows in the library as Nadia reached it, unseen. She was glad, for her pulses were not yet quite restored to normal. Jasper was evidently out, and Mrs. Noble in her room. She stood at the window to allow the soft air to fan her flushed cheeks, and felt a pair of hands close over her eyes. Someone had stolen out of the shadows and was standing close behind her.

It was not Jasper, for she knew his hands, and these were coarser and larger. She knew, immediately, that it was Hammond, the Farm Manager—Douglas Hammond, whom she heartily disliked. He was often in and out of the house, and frequently used the library for his business with Jasper. Nadia hated his queer, narrow eyes that had the look of a beast of prey; and his full-lipped mouth that revolted her. Yet, he had

never said a word to her to make her resentful, or done anything but allow her to see how pretty he thought her. Sometimes he would take the liberty of rumpling her hair because it was given to curling, and his name for her was always " Kiddie."

" Take your hands away, Mr. Hammond," she commanded.

" How did you know it was me? " said he, ungrammatically, slipping his hands to her shoulders. " Can't you be nice to a fellow, once in your life? When you were a year younger, you used to sit on my knee."

" I wonder at myself! I thought you were nice, then."

" What am I, now? "

" Horrid. I don't like you at all, so please take your hands away."

Instead of taking them away, he slipped them round her and held her his prisoner, both large hands covering her breasts. He gave Nadia a second or two to fling him off, but finding her grow rigid, he pressed her gently to him. While he talked to her deaf ears of her prettiness, and how girls like her made fellows mad to make love to them, Nadia was feeling paralysed—incapable of resistance. Was it possible that he was aware that he should not hold her so? Or was it only accidental? She wondered and wished to fling him aside, yet delayed for the very weakness that was hypnotizing her will.

When his coarse lips bent down to kiss her, the strength to resist returned suddenly, and Nadia wriggled herself free.

" How *dare* you! " she cried, stamping her foot. " If you touch me again, I'll—I'll kill you! " She was a little virago. The hateful brute!

She rushed up to her room and sat down on the edge of her bed to understand herself, and began to see daylight when memory brought back to her the things she

had heard from Dr. Mary Payne's lips. There was nothing that did not have a reason behind it. No desires that had not Nature's prompting behind, for a purpose. And that purpose—mating.

She breathed hard, then fell to thinking of Wylber's kisses and the enchantment of those hours spent under the maple. Her whole being had responded to Wylber's kisses. She had loved them, and loved him.

That's it! she told herself. She was in love. She was crazy about Wylber. Nature had done it; Mother Nature, whose child she was. All those heart-beats, those coursing thrills, had meant the marriage of two souls. It was a different sort of marriage from the one in church that was only instituted to prevent people from being fickle. As if it was necessary to tie them together if they wanted to stay!

She was conscious of an aching desire for Wylber to hold her in his arms and kiss her again. She felt that she could joyfully give herself up to him to do with her as he pleased. Her longing that he should, was like a great river rising rapidly, to drown her, utterly, in its seething currents. She had no powers of resistance—as when Hammond had dared to hold her in that way. How dared he do it, when she hated him so! Jasper had never touched her *like that*—never! His reverence for her body was a religion.

When she thought of Wylber in the same connection, confusion overtook her, for she knew she would welcome it. Would he hold her like Hammond had done?

Would he? Would he? . . .

III

At this stage of her existence, Nadia was little more than a young animal aware of instincts of which she should have been unconscious, and unable to fight them

because of Dr. Mary's teaching that made her regard Nature as responsible for everything to do with her.

Nature was wonderful. Nature worked extraordinarily. Nature was God.

IV

The next step was to believe that God meant her to love Wylber.

Wylber himself made no arguments with his conscience. He knew right from wrong; but things that were right were exceedingly dull, and those that were wrong swept a fellow off his feet. For instance, it was humanly impossible for him to stay away from Nadia after having kissed her a hundred times. He would make it a thousand before he was done with it. It might be wrong to have all this clandestine love-making, but it was very nice.

He, naturally, came in for a lot of chaff. His sisters did not spare him, divining that he was in love. Wylber was in love. Wylber had a sweetheart. How comical it was—such kids!

Wylber said nothing, for it was the religion of all honourable men never to give a girl away. Kiss—but never tell.

"Have you kissed her yet?" he was asked.

"He wouldn't be half a boy if he has neglected his opportunities," said one of the *fiancés*.

"Do look at Wylber blushing! He has the skin of a girl, and becomes like a rose if you mention Nadia Donithorne."

"A bad sign, Wylber. Naughty, naughty!"

Fired with so much approval, Wylber was less shy when next with Nadia, strolling through a wood on their way to the picnic they had planned within it.

He put his arm about her, and the fact that they had become so wonderfully intimate, made Nadia confide in him her hatred of Hammond.

Why did she hate him?

Oh, he had tried to take liberties! He was disgusting!—not as if she cared about him—was in love, or anything. He had cheek!

"I'll smash his face for him," said Wylber, clenching his fist. "What did he do? Kiss you?"

"No—worse."

Wylber coaxed her to be more explicit, and Nadia explained:

"He held me in a way he shouldn't have."

"How? Show me." He offered his hands for an example.

"He was behind me, so, and—oh, you can guess!"

"You mean like this," and Wylber showed that he was not lacking in intelligence. "Oh, Nadia!—the beast! When you belong to *me!*" He did not attempt to remove his hands, but kissed her several times, her face turned back and lifted to his, for her very complaisance gave him leave to love her "any old way" he pleased.

"Nadia!—you are so sweet!" he said breathlessly. After which they walked on a little apart, both pulsing in memory of that embrace.

The experiment was repeated a few more times during the picnic, and Wylber went home that evening walking on air. Life was an amazing thing, and Nadia was the most wonderful girl in the world.

A break occurred after this, when Mrs. Noble took Nadia away to the seaside, returning after a week to pack her things for school. Nadia herself had been listless and lost at Eastbourne, taking no interest in the side-shows, and yearning for Wylber.

"I did think you would like the sea, Nadia," said the disappointed lady. "All children do."

"I suppose I am hardly such a child now," said Nadia, not wishing to appear ungrateful.

"I know what it is. You are missing your pal. What a pity I did not bring Wylber, too."

"Oh, why didn't you!" cried Nadia, giving herself entirely away.

"I do declare you are falling in love with Wylber!" Mrs. Noble laughed heartily, as older people do at the thought of calf love.

Nadia, however, was hurt and burst into tears. It was unkind of Jasper's mother to tease her. She liked Wylber, but hated to be teased.

"I won't tease you any more. There! dry your eyes and go and bathe."

They met a few friends of the Nobles on the beach and introductions followed. There were two boys of Wylber's age and younger, and a sister of the two, Nadia's age, so that Mrs. Noble was greatly relieved in mind to think that Nadia would no longer be bored.

Nadia bathed and played with the three young people, feeling all the time that the life had gone out of her. There was nobody like Wylber. These boys served only to make the contrast striking. Clumsy louts! rough and uncouth, and hatefully self-centred. Their conversation was entirely of cricket and rugger. They lived for the papers and eagerly scanned the results of the Test matches. Girls could hang themselves for all they cared. The boy of eighteen might have been younger than herself, for all he understood of life! Her heart ached and ached for Wylber. What was he doing all the week without her?

She haunted the post-box, and listened for the postman's footsteps, all agog for letters. Mail-day came and went, and her parents' letters brought no welcoming light to her eyes. She was obsessed for news of Wylber. Boys, however, were no correspondents. They were notoriously incapable of writing letters, so she waited while the week dragged to its close, and returned in deep excitement to Basingbrook, for they had only two days left to spend together before she would have to go back to school.

V

When they were once again strolling through the fields towards the wood, Nadia found Wylber tongue-tied and devoid of eloquence.

"Talk to me! What's the matter with you?" she cried, exasperated. "I am going back so soon, and you have nothing to say!"

"I have nothing to say, because I feel desperate," he broke out, his young face looking tragic. "You are going away, and what is to become of me? I had a taste of it this past week, and it's been—hell!"

"Did you care so much, Wylber?" said she, peeping up at his set face.

"Care?" He gave a short laugh. "I have been fit for nothing. I could settle to nothing. Study? Lord! I've done with that. I can't work. I want a job." He raised his arms and dropped them. "If I had a job, in a couple of years you and I could be married. Have you thought of that?"

"Oh, Wylber!" in awed tones. "How perfectly great!"

"I thought you'd feel that way. I don't want to go to Cambridge. Poor old Dad and I had words about it. He doesn't know, so can't sympathize, but thinks that I'm idle and a rotter. Gad! If he only knew!"

When they reached the wood, they found a retired corner where Wylber felt he could let himself go a bit, and, sheltered by friendly branches, he took Nadia into his arms. Like love-birds in a nest of dead leaves, they billed and cooed, he drinking in the new delights of a love he had never before known; she yielding herself to his arms in the belief that it was fore-ordained. This was being ENGAGED. Oh, she was so grown-up!

"I love you!—I love you!" said he, with a fiercer note in his voice than she had yet heard. "Kiss me, Nadie!"

Since when had this masterfulness come into his voice? She loved the sound of it. Wylber was indeed her king—her lord!

They were like affianced lovers for the rest of that day, thinking of nothing but their mutual love, desiring the expression of it in kisses—kisses, and sundry entrancing liberties he owed to her confidence respecting Hammond.

Through the trees they could see the village church, its spire pointing heavenwards. Level fields in early autumnal shades stretched beneath them; and over all, a pearly mist creeping as the sun sank low on the horizon.

"We'll have to go back," she heard herself saying, with her face in his breast, while their hearts pounded like sledge-hammers.

"How can you go back?" he asked, brokenly.

"But—we *must!*" Then she recalled the fact that it was not imperative, as Jasper would not be in till late, and Mrs. Noble was in bed with a sick headache and had asked to be left alone to sleep. She would not dine or leave her room.

"Not yet! Love me, Nadie—you witch-girl!—you sweetest thing!"

Nadia drew his face to hers and gave him her lips. How his kisses burned and thrilled her! Her slender form was in his arms—fragrant, sweet, vibrant.

"Listen," said he, in tremulous whispers. "Have you heard these lines, ever?" He recited them with deep, vibrating passion.

"'*The fountains mingle with the river,*
And the rivers with the ocean;
The winds of heaven mix forever
With a sweet emotion.

Nothing in this world is single;
All things by a law divine
In one another's being mingle—
Why not I with thine?

See, the mountains kiss high heaven,
And the waves clasp one another;
No sister flower would be forgiven
If it disdained its brother;
And the sunlight clasps the earth,
And the moonbeams kiss the sea—
What are all these kissings worth,
If thou kiss not me?'

Isn't Shelley wonderful?"

"Is that Shelley?"

"His 'Love's Philosophy.'"

"And have you been reading poetry while I was away?"

"Yes—and other books that are equally wonderful—all about married lovers, because I feel that you and I are like married lovers—I want you so!"

Nadia felt herself borne backward to the turf in Wylber's arms, incapable of resistance, wondering, suffocated by her heart-beats, yearning for what, she did not know; and all the while he was whispering of his love—whispering and pressing her mouth with his kisses. If she had had to die the next moment, she would not have saved herself from Wylber's devouring passion, for she was infected by it, and loved him so.

VI

It was twilight before it was borne in on Nadia that she would have to go home. Quivering from head to foot, she made an effort to rise, only to be drawn back into Wylber's arms.

"Darling!—you will always love me? You will never blame me for loving you—like this?"

"No, Wylber. Am I not equally to blame?" said she, kissing him with trembling lips.

"I don't know—I am older. But, I couldn't help it! I have been mad—mad. I hardly slept while you were away, for it seemed that I was losing you, and I could not bear that! Say I will never lose you?"

"Never! never!"

"And that you will marry me when I can make a home for you?"

"Of course! As if I could marry anyone else!"

"God knows what I am to do when you have returned to school!"

"You'll be at Cambridge."

"No! I can't go there. It would be a waste of money. I must get a job. Darling—we have to-morrow!"

"Yes," said she. "One more day!"

"Will you come here with me again?"

"I must!—oh, I *must*. It is terrible to think that to-morrow is the last day! What shall we do, Wylber?"

They made wild plans by which he would steal away to the village near which was her school, and she would bribe the lodge-keeper to let her out so that she might spend a few hours with her beloved. They made vows of undying love, and were once more locked in each other's arms before the church clock, striking the dinner-hour, brought them to their feet.

In the dark shadows of a clump of laburnums outside the porch of the Farm House, they embraced and clung together once more.

"Nadia! My wonder girl!" said he. "To think of it! You and I . . . *You and I!* We belong to each other now, like man and wife, for EVER!"

"Oh, Wylber!" she cried, shivering in his arms

with a premonition of coming terrors, "I am so frightened."

"Don't be frightened!" he reassured her, with a note of triumph in his voice. "I'll take care of you. Never forget that you belong to me. I'll stand by you, whatever may happen."

But what could happen? They both laughed, for no one had seen them.

At that moment, before Wylber had time to release her, a man's figure passed close to them at the edge of the drive, and Douglas Hammond looked full at Nadia. The next instant, he entered the porch and vanished.

"I am sure the blighter saw us, and came near so as to see who we were. Damned cheek! I'd like to muck up his face for him.

"Oh, Wylber! He'll tell Jasper!"

"What can he say? That he saw us spooning? Why not? Don't girls and boys spoon when they get a chance? Don't be frightened, they can't say anything."

Nadia felt very guilty as she slipped into the house, and sped to her room. However, she realized, after a while, that she need not have been so nervous, for Jasper was not in, and no one was asking for her.

A while later, she came down and made a pretence of dining alone and in state.

CHAPTER III

A GRAVE PROBLEM

I

NADIA retired early that night as she had no wish to meet Jasper. He had such a wonderful intuition, that it was possible for him to see right through her make-believe and divine that things were not right with her. She had always hated deceit and camouflage, but, in a case like this, there were others besides herself to consider. She did not wish to precipitate a quarrel between Jasper and her beloved boy.

Judged by high moral standards, she had done a dreadful thing, she knew. Yet who was any the worse for it? Not she! At this point, Nadia looked at her face in the mirror over her dressing-table and saw nothing wrong with it. She certainly looked terribly young!—but the other day she read in the encyclopædia of Eastern customs, that girls were married in the East at thirteen and fourteen—in fact, they were known to be mothers at that early age.

Nadia's knees suddenly gave way beneath her. How was it that she had never given that side of the question a thought? She sank on her bed and looked about her with wide, scared eyes.

"Mothers?"—"early age?" . . .

That couldn't possibly happen to her? . . .

Why not, if to girls in Eastern lands? In most things she was grown-up. It was only in Europe that girls were kept back. Still, Nature took no cognizance of customs.

Nadia refused to consider the thought. It was too disastrous. She would put it behind her, for, after all, she could be scaring herself for nothing.

She diverted herself with thoughts of Wylber. What was he doing now? Most assuredly, he was living in thoughts of her, and longing for the morrow. She knew that she would not let herself be cheated out of to-morrow, for it was too late to go back. Possibly, she was mad—like Wylber. She believed she was, for she still thrilled to the echo of his love.

Would a time ever come when, in calmer blood, he would look back on this time and think badly of her? He must have been brought up by his people to believe that girls who had done what she had done, were to be considered bad?

What of himself?

Somehow, his sex always escaped the blame. It was generally the fault of the woman—girl, if she happened to be very young like herself.

In justice to her up-bringing, Nadia knew that she had been greatly to blame, for she had only been too ready to love and be loved. Ever since Dr. Mary Payne had been so frank with her, she had ached to understand fully all about this sex-love she had explained so unreservedly. If she had never been told—like Petal, for instance—she would have been indignant and horrified, and nothing would have happened. Petal only knew an innocent kind of love, and that was for her mother and girl-friends.

With her head bowed in her hands, Nadia tried to excuse herself and believe that Nature did with people as she willed. How could she have resisted Wylber? Oh, surely, he would never look back and be so cowardly as to despise her? He had said that he would get work at once, and no sooner he was able to make a home for her, she would have to be his wife.

Eventually, Nadia fell asleep thinking of the time

when she would be Wylber's wife, and no one able to part them.

II

While she was wooing sleep, Jasper sat smoking in the library, talking to Douglas Hammond. He had come in late from a neighbouring fair, feeling disappointed, as the cattle he had wanted to buy had been auctioned at figures beyond his reach. Things were increasingly hard for farmers, and he did not know what, exactly, to do. The season had been a bad one all round—a long spell of sunshine which forced the crops, then an unprecedented rainfall, to beat down and rot them.

"We'll have to draw in our horns and stop the building projects," said Hammond, rising preparatory to bidding his employer good night. "Farming in England is a mug's game," he said with a yawn. "I'd as soon go to Australia. Why don't you sell the place and emigrate? You'd find things very different on the other side," picking up his cap.

"Don't talk rot. It would break my heart to sell Basingbrook. Think of the many generations that we have owned it! Why, the place is in our bones."

"And your bones are in the place. Of course! Personally, I have no sentiment whatever. Talking of sentiment—h'm——" and he hesitated. "I don't want to be considered interfering, but—do you think it wise to let the Kiddie roam the countryside with young Wylber?"

"Wylber Young?" Jasper smiled at the transposition. He had no fears, and could afford to smile. His wonderful mother had expressed confidence. What right had he to doubt her judgment? "Why not? They have played together as children, and Wylber is a decent lad."

"That won't prevent the two getting sentimental.

I did not mean to mention it, but it is only fair to you, the Kid's guardian, to open your eyes to what is going on. Had I not seen them with my own eyes, I would not have felt justified in saying a word. But I happen to know that they are making love."

"What?" Jasper was galvanized out of his chair, and looked plainly startled.

"Why should you be surprised? Boy-and-girl affairs are as common as blackberries in August. First you give them ample opportunity for getting soft on each other, and then, are surprised."

"What did you see with your own eyes, Hammond?" asked Jasper, anxiously.

"I hate to give the Kiddie away," he replied, with an ugly sneer that belied his words, "but I was in time, at dusk, to see them bidding each other a passionate good-bye. I could have counted the seconds while they kissed, and believe me, that boy was meaning business."

"Damn you! it's like your mind. Probably the purest and most inno——"

"I guess it's terribly pure and innocent! Only, I'll tell you one thing you probably may not know. They have been spending hours in Brookside Wood every day when they have been supposed to be fishing. Have they ever caught any fish? Of course, I have an evil mind. Let it stay at that, only I felt I had to do my duty. Please yourself."

Hammond growled out "'night," and shut the door behind him, leaving Jasper to ponder on the news he had hurled at him.

"Good God!" muttered Jasper, pacing the floor. Could it be true? He was not entitled to charge Nadia with deceit and misconduct or impropriety, as it would have been exposing Hammond as a tale-bearer; nevertheless, the child had been very secretive about her feeling for Wylber. She had blushed, he remembered, when obliged to mention him, but never went out of her

way to name him. Her very silence was a sign that things were not right.

In the utmost anxiety, Jasper decided to see that they had no more chances for meetings in the wood in the day to come. Why the wood, if not to be together where they were least likely to be disturbed? Away from the beaten track, there were places in the wood that rarely saw a soul. In late autumn, when the dead twigs fell, women and children were busy all over it gathering firewood, but in early August and September, he knew that the squirrels had it all to themselves.

How had he been so trusting? In his position of responsibility, he should have been doubly careful. It was only with the idea that Nadia was too young, and Wylber a decent lad, that he had allowed them a free hand.

However, he was determined not to believe, for an instant, that any real harm had been done. Jasper, like his mother, preferred to think that human nature was capable of much goodness and had been greatly maligned. He judged others by himself, knowing that under no circumstances would he be capable of wronging an innocent girl, much less a child of Nadia's tender years.

Yet, Nadia was not so much of a child as all that, and in the eyes of a boy of eighteen, was just a "flapper," as attractive as any woman. Flappers were precocious, these days, and in some instances, were a public scandal.

He was hot and cold alternately with alarm when he allowed himself to think of his sweet Nadia—his "Bunny-rabbit"—his "Nadikins"—being led astray by Wylber. It was impossible! If he had any regard for his peace of mind, he must not allow himself even to think that anything terrible had happened. It was all an innocent, boy-and-girl affair which Nadia would look back upon with amusement. He tried to recall himself as a schoolboy, wondering if he had not had

such an experience; but could only remember having adored a peroxided booking-clerk, fifteen years older than himself, because, in his eyes, she was a goddess.

After a wakeful night and haunting dreams, Jasper made plans to spend the whole day with Nadia, himself. Whatever she might think of it, he felt that it was his duty. On inquiry, he learned from Nadia that she expected Wylber to call for her after lunch, as she had her packing all the morning. "That is all right," said he. "I'll take you both for a motor run. I have purposely set to-day aside, as it is your last with us."

With a pang at his heart, he saw her face fall, then grow mutinous.

"But—Bruno—we have already arranged a walk! I can't upset it all, now."

"Oh, yes," said Jasper, imperturbably. "You have had Wylber every day, so to-day is mine. Don't you want me any more, Nadikins? or has Wylber cut me out?" he added, playfully.

"It isn't a question of not wanting you, Bruno darling," she returned, feeling convicted of ingratitude, "but an engagement is an engagement."

"All right, then. I'll come too. Surely you don't object to my walking with you and Wylber?" He purposely refused to meet her eyes lest he should again be witness to the truth in them. She wanted to be alone with the boy—that was too evident, and would have to be disappointed.

"You can, if you like," said she, without enthusiasm.

How changed! Time was, when she wanted no one else. But he had deliberately thrown her back upon herself, and Wylber had more than taken his place. He suffered a twist of the heart.

It was a very unsuccessful walk, verifying the old saying concerning "Two's company." All the while, Jasper found that the burden of conversation was on his shoulders, for the two seemed to have been stricken

dumb. Subconsciously, he cursed himself for his blind folly in having given things a chance to get so far.

How far? was the crucial question. He did not know, but could only hope that he was alarming himself for nothing. It was plain that the girl and boy were in love—innocently, of course! It could not be otherwise. But what a damned fool he had been!

When they returned home, tea was served in the drawing-room, with Mrs. Noble to "pour out," and the two male members of the company to "hand around." But it was plain to the most obtuse imagination that Nadia and Wylber were incapable of concentrating their minds on doing justice to the occasion.

"You poor dears," said Mrs. Noble, all unknowingly, "I can see that you are going to miss each other badly! But the term will pass very quickly and you'll have more good times together. In winter, there'll be skating, for one thing."

Wylber's hand shook so that he spilled the scones on the floor, which Nadia helped to retrieve. Jasper intercepted an agonizing exchange of glances, and his heart felt like lead.

Wylber would have been asked to dine and spend the evening, but a warning glance at his mother from Jasper froze the invitation on her lips. Something was not quite right, or Jasper was becoming foolishly suspicious.

Wylber was therefore allowed to wish the company good-bye after six, and betake himself homeward. He made no effort to bid Nadia a special farewell, which was a proof that he would be round the first thing in the morning to do so, and Jasper felt that he could breathe again. He was glad that Nadia was returning to school the next day, and that the intimacy would have time to cool down.

When Nadia vanished to her room, looking pinched and tearful, Jasper could not rest, but tried his mother's nerves with his peregrinations over the carpet.

"You look upset," said she, anxiously. "What has happened? I could see you were out of tune with the children and did not want Wylber to stay. Poor boy!—and this Nadia's last evening."

"Don't you think that they have had enough of each other, and that it is about time you noticed that they are getting a little too fond of being alone together?"

"It is quite natural, Jasper. You have forgotten that you were young once."

Jasper was young still in respect of sentiment, but how was his mother so ingenuous and short-sighted? If he had been more at home, he would never have been deceived.

"It may be natural, but ours is a great responsibility. It makes me go grey to have charge of a girl like Nadia."

"Why? I thought you had a deep affection for her and thought the world of her."

"I do still—the very world of her."

"And yet you speak as if you feared she was not straight?"

"Everybody is straight till put to the test. It is then you know how few don't go crooked. I don't want Nadia put to any tests while she is with me."

"My dear Jasper, how foolish! You need never trouble your head. Nadia has been well brought up, and so has Wylber. You have only to examine the environment of young people, to know what to expect of them under all circumstances."

"I honour your tribute to a good upbringing, Mother dear," said Jasper, trying to snatch at comfort and feeling that, in his own case, it had answered—fairly well. He had not been a saint. He had done a few things in his day—particularly when the war broke out and he, having reached fighting age, had gone to France where it was difficult to live irreproachably. But on the whole——

He took up a picture of Nadia, recently taken by a photographer in Bond Street, and stood looking at it earnestly. It showed a pair of starry eyes questioning life; a sweet, mobile mouth given to laughter and love. She was very loving—very clinging—yet capable of tremendous force and initiative. She struck him, in the first flush of adolescence, as a rare instrument waiting to respond to the first chord struck by a lover's passion. Wylber was a handsome, manly boy with all a youngster's curiosity towards life, and all a man's power to love and forget the world while loving. Nadia was altogether too new to the temptations of sex to have learned the value of self-control. She had a moral sense, but intoxicated by first love, even the moral sense could be hypnotized.

Jasper never wanted to live over such an evening again, with its doubts and fears and embarrassments. Nadia came to dinner with reddened lids, which invoked Mrs. Noble's sympathy. She prided herself on her great understanding of young people's minds, and the need to sympathize with them before hoping to influence and guide. She thought Jasper had lost his sense of proportion to be so scared over trifles. Every boy and every girl had to have incipient love affairs, and they never did any harm. In this, she considered herself exceedingly broad-minded, and blamed others for not being the same.

Apart from his anxiety regarding possibilities, Jasper was cut to the heart to think that his Nadikins was, all of a sudden, weaned from her devotion to himself. It seemed that he no longer counted. Nadia's thoughts for the rest of the evening were with Wylber, and, accordingly, she was absent-minded and queer. It was a relief when she rose to say good night.

Jasper accompanied her to her room door, a thing he never did, as he disliked forming unnecessary habits.

"What's the matter, my Bunny-rabbit?" said he, placing an arm round her shoulders, and turning her to

face him. " You are all upset and weepy? Can't you confide in ' Bruno '? "

" I—I—oh, please, Bruno!—it's nothing, nothing! " she said, making an effort to break away.

" Nadia! " his tone arrested her, it was so unlike his usual voice. She read protest, anxiety, fear, and buried her face in his breast.

" I—don't know! Perhaps I am upset. I don't want to go back to school," she sobbed.

He stroked her curly head and prayed for inspiration how to act and what to say.

" I think that's quite natural after such a happy holiday. But, you'll soon get over that, and knuckle down to work. You have to go back, Nadia. Your people wish it, and then there's Cheltenham——"

" Oh, it will drive me mad! Don't send me back, Bruno! "

" Darling, why be so upset? Tell me everything. Keep nothing back. Am I not your Bruno, always ready to stand by you. Be open with me," he repeated, his heart weak with dread. Why he felt so convinced that things were not right, he could not say, but a weight of presentiment seemed to have descended upon him, bowing him to the earth. Unconsciously he drew her closer as though he would protect her against all the world.

" It is all your fault!—all your fault! " she sobbed wildly. " If you had only let me feel that you wanted to be with me all the while I—I shouldn't have got to care so much for—for——"

" Wylber? Poor little kid! And you actually thought that I did not want to be with my wee Nadikins! Oh! "—it was almost a moan.

" You gave me up! "

" Never! I had my work——"

" Oh, it doesn't matter now!—nothing matters any more! I will go back to school, and—and—I know I shall run away."

This was terrible! What was he to do? This was hysteria, and must not be permitted.

"See, Nadikins," said he, firmly. "You've got to be reasonable. You are still very young; not nearly done with school, and it is my duty and yours, to do what is right. You have got to go back, and get Wylber out of your head. See? He hasn't any business to have made you care for him. Later on, when you have done with school and he has made good, why then, no one will want to part you. This has been deplorable!"

He did not know how deplorable, thought Nadia, in the midst of her weeping; nor could she tell him!

Jasper went on to tell her comfortingly that the best men and women were those who learned to govern themselves. She had to conquer this foolishness, and be brave. Her age and all the rest of it—his responsibility for her—*everything* had to be considered. If she had become fond of Wylber and he of her, there was no harm in it, so long as she respected herself and her obligations to her people. There was plenty of time—et cetera . . .

His voice passed over her head, and the half of what he said was lost in Nadia's passionate disappointment at having had her last day with Wylber ruined. They had planned so much—so much! That last day——

Now, she would have to go back to school feeling left in mid air!

Wylber? What was the good of only *seeing* him and saying "Good-bye"? The agony of it would be unbearable!

All her passionate soul was in revolt. What was Bruno saying?

It mattered little what he said, she was too wretched to listen!

"I'll go, Bruno," said she, miserably.

"Good night," said he, feeling that he had made

very little impression, if any, on her mind. It was like one diseased and incapable of accepting reason.

"Good night," said she, allowing him to kiss her. She did not want to kiss anyone but Wylber again.

Jasper saw the door close on her, and retired to his room, his thoughts in a turmoil. In vain did he woo sleep; everything seemed to try his nerves—the ticking of a clock on the landing, the gentle rattle of the sash in the soft, night breeze. Outside, the moon was shining brightly out of a cloudless sky, and, filtering through the blinds, made objects in his room visible.

Unable to bear the recurring sound of drumming woodwork, he got out of bed and made his way to the window in order to silence the rattle. Moving aside the blind, he had a wonderful view of the grounds bathed in the light of the moon. Every object seemed clear, except where the shadows were darkest.

Suddenly, from below, as if direct from the house, he saw an object advance into the open, and dart across the moonlit space of drive into the shadows of a group of laburnums, beyond.

It was Nadia! It could be no one else, for the figure was slight and small, and had the vitality of extreme youth—in fact, he was familiar with its grace of movement.

In a moment he had taken in the potentialities of the situation. Enough had gone before for him to sense the gravity of such an act on Nadia's part. Two things were possible—one, that she was running away so as not to be sent to school, the other——?

It was unthinkable.

The unthinkable thing happened before his eyes, for before he could release the blind and make up his mind how to act, he saw Nadia's little figure emerge at the end of the shadow, accompanied by another, wide and tall, and the two scuttle away out of sight towards the wilder part of the Farm House grounds.

Nadia and Wylber! The boy had come for her.

It took no time for Jasper to fling on a coat over his pyjamas, put his bare feet into slippers, and run out into the moonlight to find and bring Nadia back. Was she mad? What he suffered while searching vainly for her, was known only to himself and God.

Jasper went first to the summer-house, as the most likely place in which to find the culprits, but it was in deep shadow and as silent as the grave. He stood at the door and looked in. The seat was unoccupied, and there was no answer to his call. Apparently, they preferred some other spot. There was an old barn that was in process of demolition. He visited that. He called softly, afraid to awake the echoes, for he did not wish anyone in the house to hear that Nadia had done this reckless thing—this unbelievable thing!

Tired and chilled, after fruitlessly searching the grounds for hours, he was, eventually, forced to return and hurry into his clothes. Whatever had happened, was past praying for. She had got away with her boy lover, and it would only make matters worse, for all concerned, for him to rouse the house to track her down. Sternly, he recognized the futility of any such procedure. It would have to be his business to cover up her shame, not expose it.

She was such a child, she couldn't have realized the half of her folly and imprudence, her sin, her ghastly mistake! Love and passion had overcome her like an avalanche and drowned all reason. She had not acquired sufficient balance at her age, to stand up against its force.

God help her!

God help himself!

III

To go back a little:

Somewhere about midnight, while Nadia had been

thinking of Wylber with love and longing, jealous of sleep lest it should rob her of one moment of intoxicating thought, she heard a noise at her casement window, as if a shower of light gravel had struck the pane.

Her heart stood still, for who could have done it but Wylber?

He was attracting her attention!

She sprang out of bed and ran stealthily to the window. Just at first, she could see nothing but the white moonlight on the gravelled drive, and dark shadows under the trees.

All in a moment, out of the darkest of these, Wylber stepped and looked upwards.

She waved her hand, and he motioned to her to come down.

Could she? Did she dare?

Nadia remembered that he had called her a sport. He loved her because she was not like any other girl he knew. He believed her capable of daring anything. She had no doubt, therefore, what she must do.

Feeling intensely honoured by his approval, his trust and confidence, she rushed into her clothes, and wrapping a scarf round her, hurried below.

Her love for him rose chokingly to her throat in dry sobs, for the wonder and mystery of love was the most divine, sacred thing that could fill a human heart. If the skies fell, if the world crumbled, nothing would keep her from him. She could not hurry fast enough. Father, Mother, Bruno, friends, were as nothing to her—she had no thoughts to spare for them.

Swiftly, she tip-toed downstairs; silently, she unbolted the heavy door. It swung back on its hinges, and allowed her through. She then drew it to, unclosed, so that she could return in safety, unheard.

They could hardly wait for the sheltering branches to screen them before being locked in each other's arms.

"I had to come! I had to come!" he kept

repeating, " or I should have gone stark mad wanting you so! He mucked up our day, so that there was nothing for it but to come to you, like this. Oh, Nadia, you are wonderful! "

They sped instinctively to the nearest shelter, which was the summer-house, the shadows playing about them as they went, the glory of the radiant moon making silver the path on which they trod, while all around them the leaves whispered in sympathy with their love, even as he whispered in his newly-found eloquence.

Nadia thought him godlike in his proud beauty, his manliness, his masterfulness, and accounted herself blessed among girls. It seemed to her that Nature had opened to her all the world's treasures, and that she was rich beyond measure. Even if Wylber and she must part, no one could stop their loving each other, and finding ways and means of uniting.

" Were you seen by anyone as you left the house, Nadie? " he asked her, bringing her to earth as they entered the trellised door of the summer-house.

" I saw no one. Oh, Wylber! How wonderful of you to come! "

" Just to think—everyone asleep, only you and I —here—and together! " He drew her down beside him on the bench to lean against him, impatient of delays when he wanted her kisses—wanted to crush her to him—wanted to——

" What's that? " Nadia spoke, lifting her face from his breast.

They could distinctly hear the rapid approach of footsteps.

" Someone has seen, and is following. Quick! " He pulled her through the opposite door and made her crouch with him in the dark shadow of the summer-house where the shrubs grew close and thick. With his finger on his lip, he enjoined strict silence, and Nadia obediently followed his lead. At that moment of hiding, he was all of a venturesome schoolboy bent

on eluding discovery. He even laughed under his breath to reassure his companion, for they heard Jasper's voice calling: "Nadia!"

Trembling from head to foot, Nadia hid her face on Wylber's breast.

"Nadia?" Jasper's call again, his voice sounding strained and frightened. So unlike his tones—poor Bruno! He was trying to take care of her, but what did he understand! No one could understand. . .

When there was no sound and he was satisfied that she was not in the summer-house, he went on, as though he had no time to lose, and his footsteps died away.

"I think it is now quite safe. He won't come back here again," said Wylber. "Serve him right for spoiling our day!"

"Poor Jasper!" said Nadia. She hardly knew why she pitied him, except that she was sorry to think how she was deceiving him who had always been so good to her. If he knew she was out of the house, she was surely in for a bad time, but it was too late to go back. Too late to pretend anything, for if she died for it, she would not give Wylber up.

His arms about her made her feel strong enough to defy anyone—even Jasper—her dear Bruno, who would now turn from her in disgust. He would think her *bad*. Who would not? How little they all understood! for she knew she was not bad. Never had she felt so good and exalted before. Love did that, she believed, when it was as sincere as her love for Wylber.

They called her a "kid," and according to her age, she was nothing more, but that was only because it was the custom to keep girls young, long after they were capable of becoming wives and choosing their own mates.

These thoughts, which were more impressions registered mentally, while Wylber drew her with him

into the dark shelter of the little wooden house, soon fled, or were absorbed into the glory of mutual love.

IV

At the first hint of dawn, Wylber sped homeward, so as to be in bed before the maids came down to take in the milk. He was most concerned that his father should not discover his absence from home, or think that he was in any way connected with Nadia's being out of the house all night. Fathers could make things jolly unpleasant for a son. She was charged to tell Jasper that she had not been able to sleep, so had taken a run in the moonlight—it was so like the daytime. How could he refuse to believe her if she swore it, and stuck to her guns? It was not as if he had seen her with anyone, even supposing he had seen her leave the house.

It was clear that Wylber, who was splendid in all things, was not brave enough to tell the truth and face the consequences with his father. This, however, he had tried to explain, and Nadia had done her best to believe he was right. "You see," he said, convincingly, "I am, at present, wholly dependent on the pater, and he is as narrow and straight-laced as a parson can be. He'd have a fit if he knew about us, and I am not sure but he might turn me out of the house. I don't happen to be independent, or with a bean of my own, so what good would that do you and me? It would certainly put the lid on any more meetings. I'd probably have to enlist or emigrate—God knows!"

Nadia had clung to him in a panic. She could not bear him to talk of enlisting or emigrating! If he went away, she knew she would die. So it was agreed that she should face Jasper and defy him to do his worst. If she never gave Wylber away, he could not

dream that there was anything wrong about her going out at night. At the worst, what could Jasper do? Oh, she was safe enough if she chose to say nothing. But Nadia wished with all her heart that she could admit what she had done. It might be terrible in Jasper's eyes, but he could not kill her for it, and had always stood by her.

Nadia dragged her weary way to the house, feeling very much of a culprit, more because of the lies to which she was pledged, than for having "gone wrong," as people put it.

Of all sins, it seemed to Nadia that those committed in the name of Love were the least evil; yet, somehow, people made more fuss about "going wrong" than stealing and false-witnessing, and doing other beastly, mean crimes that had nothing but sordid motives to them. What was the matter with the world that it had no sense of proportion? Even in the Ten Commandments there was no mention of "going wrong" on the list. The seventh referred to quite another class of sin, for when people were married and broke their marriage vows, they were guilty of dishonourable conduct. She refused to regard the expression of her feeling for Wylber as dishonourable. It injured no person in the world.

Thus fortified with self-justification, she pushed the door, to find it yield so quickly, that she all but stumbled into Jasper's arms.

He had, evidently, been watching for her, and was down to meet her as she entered. Instantly, her heart leapt into her mouth, her knees trembled and gave way, and she shook like an aspen leaf.

"You frightened me," she said, extricating herself from Jasper's support.

"Nadia!" Never had Jasper sounded so uncompromising, so stern. "I have something to say to you. Come into the library." He ushered her into the silent, gloomy room into which the grey light of dawn

was beginning to creep, and made her sit down in one of the large easy chairs. She looked so small and slight that she might have been a child of twelve, and Jasper's heart was wrung with anguish.

Nadia had never expected such an opening, though she had half expected to meet Jasper on entering. He had, apparently, kept up all night awaiting her return.

"You have been out all night with Wylber. My God! how shall I answer to your parents for this?"

That aspect of the case had never struck her before, and she looked back at him helplessly. Jasper, honest guardian, faithful friend—how was he going to account for his stewardship?

The enormity of what she had done suddenly attained gigantic proportions. It seemed that people could never do anything without involving others in some form of punishment! She had stolen happiness that must be paid for in a way she had never imagined. Her parents would lay all the blame on Jasper.

She tried to maintain an air of defiance, till she saw Jasper crumple up before her eyes, sink down on the chair at his desk and bury his face in his arms.

Nadia, always sympathetic and tender-hearted, instantly melted. Bruno with his arms on the desk, his face buried from sight, was crying because of her.

Crying! for his shoulders heaved; strangled sounds were audible.

Terror seized her soul. Was it as bad as all that?

Was that how her conduct appeared?—so dreadful as to make Jasper—a MAN—he was very much a man!—weep?

"Oh, Bruno!" she cried timidly, laying a small hand on his head, "you are breaking my heart!"

"You have broken mine!" came his reply.

"I—didn't think you would feel so badly about it," she murmured, making no attempt to fall back on lies and pretence. She had forgotten the drilling she had received, for Jasper had gone past the need for lies.

He knew.

"Don't you at all realize what you have done, Nadia?" he asked, looking at her with tear-laden eyes. The sight of his sorrow, his suffering, was her condemnation. No reproaches could have brought home to her the full extent of her degradation so completely. She was a subject for tears and desolation! "Can't you see the awfulness of it? You—a little girl, only just growing up—not a woman, yet, for some years—and this young scoundrel——"

"Don't blame him, or think of me as only a baby! I was just as much at fault. We love each other, Bruno. Oh, I can't tell you how we feel about parting! It was that—and—and everything—but you will never understand!"

Nadia stood before him, her hands crossed on her breast, white, trembling, miserable, saying that he would never understand!

Jasper was not deficient in understanding, but that such a thing should have happened to the little girl he had loved and protected, made him wish to die.

"Oh, Nadia!—this is a deathblow! There are some things we hold in the highest esteem, to protect which we would give our lives, and that is a girl's honour. What has happened to yours? Before you have learned to understand the very A B C of Life, you have bartered it for a boy's passion!"

"I only know that I love him—oh, Bruno, don't look at me as if I have fallen beneath your contempt!"

Jasper could have told her that he had no contempt for her because of the great love and pity that was rending his heart, but he felt unable to speak, and returned to the protection of his arms that the look of reproach in his eyes should no longer offend.

And Nadia, feeling spurned and despised, fled from the room to shut herself in and brood upon the thing she had done. Jasper had just said that he would

have given his life to have protected her honour. That she had bartered it for a boy's passion!

It was not true! it was not true!

She never thought of honour or anything when she gave herself to Wylber. They had both loved so much, that the rest became as natural as breathing. It just had to happen. Couldn't Jasper understand?

Dr. Mary Payne would know. Oh, if she could go to Dr. Mary Payne! She wanted Dr. Mary to tell her that she need not worry; it was Nature, and Nature was the influence of God.

Love was from God—therefore love like hers was not wrong, however badly it was misunderstood and condemned. But she could not make people see that! Bruno was devastated with grief for her degradation —prostrated with the sense of his responsibility to her people, and would have her feel that she had done a dreadful thing.

If she listened to him, she would begin to feel that he was right, for Bruno was wise and good and wonderful. She would have to see Dr. Mary about it; also, if possible, get out of going back to school. She would never face school again. All at once she had outgrown school. She had been able to lose herself in her studies before, but that could never be again.

Nadia was almost swooning with fatigue when she climbed into bed and fell into an exhausted sleep.

CHAPTER IV

TURMOIL AND TRIBULATION

I

WHILE Nadia was facing facts with Jasper, Wylber let himself into the Vicarage to find, on his arrival, the whole house in confusion and grief.

Something terrible had happened, he could see by the stricken face of the maid as she scurried down the stairs and disappeared. His sister, Belle, who had been watching for his return, greeted him with a flood of tears.

It seemed, that while he had been spending halcyon moments with Nadia, his father was dying. Never had he been more needed at home in all his young life than that very night of all nights, and he was away—secretly engaged—gone on his own selfish affairs, and could not be found! If only he had been at home!

His father was dead.

Wylber sank on a hall seat, feeling stunned.

Belle had enough knowledge of the world to suspect that this big boy of eighteen had not been away most of the night on any simple errand, but did not question him, for she knew he would make up a lie. It was only a desperate misfortune, and everyone was inconsolable. If he had been at home, he could have ridden off on his motor-cycle for Dr. Friend in a neighbouring

town, as the Basingbrook physician was ill with the 'flu, and there was no one nearer than Malingford they could get. As it was, they had tried to telephone from the post office, which was, fortunately, open all night; but could not get Dr. Friend as he was at a party where there was no 'phone. Mrs. Friend's maid promised to do her best to get him. All that made great delays. Eventually, when Dr. Friend did arrive, it was too late to do any good. He said he came as soon as he could. It would have been better if the maid had called up the nearest doctor, as the delay getting him so far out in the country, was the mischief. The girl had to bicycle, and, being night, she was nervous. It had all been a pitiful bungle.

It was as plain as anything, indicated by all that was said, that Wylber's absence from home at the critical moment was responsible for his father's death. Time was everything in cases of that sort, and too much time had been lost. An injection might have worked wonders!

"Oh, Wylber," sobbed his sister Belle, "you will reproach yourself far more than anyone can reproach you."

"Especially," said his other sister, "when you know that Dad kept asking for you all the time. It worried him dreadfully that you were not in the house. In fact, Mother said that it was the worry of knowing you had gone out without a word to anyone, and all night, that was the last straw."

"Oh, my God!" muttered Wylber to himself, covering his face with his hands. It was his fault! Undoubtedly, his fault! But for his unfortunate madness, his father might now have been alive!

He could bear no more, but rushed headlong to his room to weep like a little child.

He had been told that his father had passed away as the clock struck three—and people talked of presentiments and intuitions! He had experienced

none at all while in that summer-house. What evil genius had made him leave the house that night, he did not know, but he had been driven mad by the way he had been headed off Nadia all day, and was determined to have his own back. He had damnable luck, he told himself. Poor little Nadia! Oh, well, this was going to upset his career, right enough. In the midst of grieving for his father, he was not blind to the fact that life was going to become very hard for the whole family.

There was enough money for his mother to live on —nothing more. Fortunately, his sisters would marry quickly and have their own homes, while he—there would be no Cambridge for him now. He would have to find work somehow—somewhere.

That was all right. He had been wanting to get a job, but without qualifications it was not going to be easy in England.

The morning was well advanced when he went to comfort his mother, dreading the ordeal, for he needed comfort himself.

Mrs. Young was not so considerate of his feelings as were his sisters, and was only waiting to see him to tell him what she thought of his conduct. In the midst of her tears, she lashed him with her tongue.

"What were you doing out of the house last night?" she asked, after telling him that he was accountable for his father's death. "You could not have been out for any decent purpose. I missed a certain book from my shelf that has not been written for unmarried people, and afterwards found it in your drawer. It only shows me that you have not been behaving properly. If the Nobles knew it, they would not allow you to associate with Nadia. I am disgusted. Your poor father was made wretched at the end, wondering what you were up to. Agitation was bad for him, and he was greatly agitated. Who were you with, last night?"

"Oh, Mother," said the boy, "aren't things bad enough without your scolding me?" He sank into a chair, looking white and heavy-eyed. "I am cursing myself enough without your going for me in this way."

"That a son of mine could be capable of such behaviour, cuts me to the heart. I no longer feel you are my son. At your age, after all your careful bringing up, to find you, whom I trusted so, utterly lost to all moral sense! A mother looks to her children, at a time like this, for comfort and consolation, but you have only brought me shame and reproach. Oh, go!—go away! You are nothing but a disappointment to me!"

Wylber, distracted with remorse and a sense of irrevocable loss, gave her a passionate look of appeal and rushed from the room. Though he had begun to believe himself such a man, all at once he felt a despairing boy, bereaved, despised, forever branded with a curse; for it was through him that his beloved Dad had no chance to live—indeed, his end was hastened through his misdoings. He was not fit to live.

In his anguish and repentance, he wanted to die. If he died, they would know that their reproaches had driven him to take his life. He pictured his mother grieving inconsolably for her loss—a double loss—and wishing that she had treated him more kindly. It was hitting a fellow who was down, to go at him like that.

There was a pistol in his father's bureau which had belonged to an uncle who had been killed in the war. There were cartridges too. What was the good of his living, if he was never to be rid of that gnawing, devouring remorse?

He would never be able to tell his father how much he had honoured and loved him. The beloved Dad had passed away, aware that his son was doing wrong—

feeling all the bitterness of disappointed hopes. The thought would haunt that son to his grave!

In his frenzy, Wylber possessed himself of the pistol and cartridges, and loading the chambers, sat down on his bed to summon the requisite amount of courage for the pulling of the trigger that was to end everything for him. Nadia would hear what had happened and know that he had been unable to bear his grief. She would be terribly upset, poor Nadie!—and live to think he was better dead, for, as she grew older, she would look back and blame him for having seduced her.

Every way he looked at it, he was, certainly, better dead.

How easy it was to die with a deadly thing like that in the hand. He lifted the revolver to his head, his finger on the trigger. He had only to pull the trigger firmly, and—flash!—all would be over.

He was thinking of pulling it, when there was a knock on the door and his sister looked in.

"Wylber, here is Mr. Noble to see you," she said, hardly looking at him, so dim were her eyes with weeping. "I am showing him in here, as the maid is preparing the sitting-room."

She retired, and Jasper entered, with set face and eyes ringed with shadows. Wylber, for the moment paralysed, forgot that he was holding the revolver in his right hand; the shock of a visit from Jasper having scattered his remaining wits.

"What are you doing with *that* in your hand?" said Jasper, moved to immediate action. "Here, give it to me, you damned coward! It's a good way out of the difficulty, isn't it?"

Before Wylber realized what was happening, the revolver was taken out of his hand and transferred to Jasper's pocket.

"I don't know why you should interfere," said the boy. "I want to die. It isn't a happy thought that

but for me, my father might now be living. Oh, God! —the thought is driving me mad."

"What do you mean?" said Jasper who had come to deal roughly with him for his crime against Nadia, but who had been checked by the calamity that had overtaken the Youngs in the night.

"I was out last night," Wylber explained, wretchedly, "so there was too much time lost. But for that, the doctor might have been fetched in time!"

"You were out, you blackguard! I could kill you!" Jasper looked as if quite capable of the act, but Wylber did not flinch.

"You saw me try to kill myself. Why didn't you let me? I know I am not fit to live. Oh, my God! I cannot bear it!"

Jasper saw that the boy was not himself, that his grief for his father's death was unhinging his mind, and was unable to continue. Wylber had no wish to defend himself, he accepted the abusive terms as just, and buried his face in the pillow, moaning miserably, as if in physical suffering. What was there for Nadia's guardian to do but leave matters as they were, and retire. Nothing could undo the wrong done.

Jasper left him, and asked for Mrs. Young, to whom he explained the circumstances in which he had just found her son.

"He wants looking after," said he, "or there will be a tragedy."

"Oh, Mr. Noble, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for saving me this terrible reproach. It was my fault! I was hard on him—my poor son! I should have had more understanding." Wringing her hands, she ran to the rescue. If thwarted of his intention with the pistol, he might find some other way!

Bursting into Wylber's room, she flung her arms about her son, and blended her tears with his.

"Forgive me, my boy, my boy! I did not know

what I was saying. Oh, think of me, and never attempt to take your life! " she pleaded.

" Mother, Mother! " Wylber buried his face on her shoulder. " How shall I bear it? What shall I do to atone? "

" We'll try to bear it together, and take up the burden bravely. He is at peace, and knows now how much you loved him. I know, dear, that you would have given your life for his, so don't blame yourself any more. You did not know. I suppose we old people should have more sympathy for the follies of youth. I must try to, but I so wanted my son to be good, like his father, and to do nothing of which he might be ashamed. Whatever happens, you are my son, and never, never, do such a terrible thing as to try to take your own life! "

Thus she soothed and comforted him, and made him feel that things were not so bad, but that they could be mended. Wylber, looking deathly, took to his bed and so scared everyone who had cast reproaches at him, that he was taken back into their loving hearts and forgiven. It was whispered about the village how Jasper Noble had saved him from committing suicide.

II

Jasper returned home when he had made the pistol over to a responsible member of the Young household, wondering within himself if his best course would not be to wipe out the whole ghastly episode connected with Nadia and try to live it down. In time, it would cease to feel so poignant, and Nadia herself would learn wisdom. If nobody knew anything about it, she would have the chance to recover from her infatuation and still keep her self-respect. He was not sure, but that he would rather have seen her dead, than dishonoured, as now.

Still—she was very precious to him, and she was alive.

Till her mother came home from India, he would have to take far better care of her and leave the responsibility to no second person. He was to blame for having left Nadia to his mother's care so long, when he should have known that his mother had a childlike confidence in human nature, and thought no evil of any living soul.

He was rather glad not to see Nadia all day as she had taken a chill, and was better in bed. His mother visited her frequently and remarked on her feverish look and lack of appetite, but did not think it necessary to call in the doctor.

Nadia took the fullest advantage of her indisposition to keep to her room, for she dreaded the inevitable conversation she must have with Jasper, and for the first time in her life, feared him. It hurt dreadfully to know how desperately she had hurt him, and how keenly he was feeling his responsibility. What was to be the outcome of it all, she did not know, for she believed that he was bound to write and tell her parents, and there was no counting on what they would do.

She lay in bed by the hour, hugging her bedclothes and thinking of Wylber. The news had been brought to her that Wylber's father had died in the night, and she was wondering how the Vicar's death would affect her lover's prospects. He did not want to go to Cambridge any more than she to school. Was he grieving for his father, or thinking and longing for her as she was longing for him? Quite unrepentant, she dwelt in thoughts of her god-like lover. Though plunged, all at once, into womanhood, she was yet a child, and no more than fifteen years old in her grasp of realities.

Mrs. Noble talked of her to her son when they dined together, and said she believed that the child was making the most of her indisposition to stay at home.

The holidays had quite unsettled her, but she would soon get over the feeling once she was back at school again.

"It's unusual that she is not asking for you," the lady continued, "which means that she is becoming more sensible. She is getting too big to fuss over you as she does. It doesn't suit her age to be sitting on your knee and wanting to be petted. Of course, we understand the position, but it is time she gave it up."

Jasper kept silent.

"She wrote a pencilled note of condolence to Wylber, which I sent over by the gardener. Poor boy! Mrs. Young says he is prostrated with grief. I wonder what they are going to do with him, now."

"He'll have to get a job, and it won't be easy. Did you see her letter?"

"Oh, no! I did not ask to. Why should I?"

"Has Wylber replied?" Jasper's hands clenched involuntarily.

"I don't think so, if he is as bad as I hear."

"When are they going to leave the Vicarage?"

"Mrs. Young told me, when I was with her to-day, that she had a telegram from her sister in Wales, and was going to her on a visit immediately, taking Wylber with her for a change. They are afraid to leave him a minute; so, a young man, a neighbour, sleeps with him at night. While she is away, the girls will break up, pack, and get everything ready for the move to town. Belle and Kate will be married at once—their *fiancés* wish it—and Mrs. Young will take a flat somewhere in Earlscourt. She has a friend who is fixing that up for her."

Jasper breathed a sigh of relief to think that Wylber Young would be gone by the time Nadia was up and about; and was still more eased when he heard, a few days later from his mother, that long cables had come and gone between Mrs. Young and her late husband's brother in Canada, concerning Wylber's future. It seemed that Mr. Wylberforce Young, of Montreal, who

had lost his only son, Wylber's cousin, in the war, had expressed his readiness to adopt his nephew and teach him to farm his ranch. He was getting on in years and had no one of his own to keep alive his interest in life, or to whom he could leave his property, unless to Wylber, who would have to prove his worthiness. Now that the boy's father was dead, he thought that the sooner he took his passage and crossed over, the better, as idleness bred laziness, and laziness was destructive to initiative. If Wylber had golden opportunities of success in England, he would not advise his going over; but there was no question about the scarcity of jobs in England, and the poor chance Wylber would have of making good.

This matter was exercising the minds of the Youngs and their relatives, and Mrs. Young was being persuaded to resign herself to the necessity of putting aside her own feelings for her son's advantage. There was no doubt that he would be made a man of by his uncle, and soon be put into the way of providing for his mother in comfort—even luxury. Women, all the world over, were sacrificing themselves for their children; so Mrs. Young was beginning to see the impossibility of keeping Wylber back.

"And Wylber?" asked Jasper. "What does he think of it?" Jasper now loathed the boy, and the very sound of his name roused murderous feelings. He would, cheerfully, have gone to Wales the moment he knew that Wylber had recovered, for the purpose of giving him a sound thrashing, or of risking a thrashing himself, that he might express in what regard the young blackguard was held with Nadia's guardian. If Nadia was older, and Wylber of age, he would have made him marry her. But nothing could be done while the two were minors and Nadia's parents were abroad.

Moreover, the responsibility of taking any definite action, was too great for Jasper to contemplate unadvised, nor could he share his knowledge of what had

happened, with a living soul. To make a row with Wylber would be to advertise Nadia's dishonour To force a marriage instead of hushing things up, might make lifelong misery for the two. At their age, they were not qualified to know their own minds. What could he do? Thinking of and for Nadia, had given him too many sleepless nights, so that he wanted nothing so much as to be allowed to forget, and wipe the slate clean.

If Nadia would only co-operate!

"What does he think of it?" he asked his mother.

"I believe Wylber is simply crazy to go. He talks of nothing else. Belle says that he is so depressed, taking no interest in life, these days, that they are all frightened for him; so the only thing is to let him go, and the sooner the better. It will take him out of himself and stop his eternal brooding."

"It is the very best thing they could do for him. Does Nadia know?"—making a show of indifference.

"No, I've not told her, yet."

"I shall see her before she sleeps, and give her the news."

Jasper accordingly paid Nadia a visit, the first after a week, and found her curled up in bed, scribbling with a pencil on a letter pad.

"You can spare me a few minutes, Nadia," said he, unsmilingly. "I thought we should arrange something, and need your help. How are you feeling?"

Nadia pushed her writing-pad under her pillow and said she was going to get up in the morning. Jasper thought she looked startlingly pale, with blue shadows under her eyes. Grieving had done that for her, and the gnawing fangs of suspense; these things he could guess.

"Are you going to send me back to school?" she asked, mutinously.

"I don't think I want to send you back to school —*now*," said he. "I have been dreadfully worried

about it, Nadia. I don't think your mind is in a fit state for school life."

"Oh, it isn't! Bruno, let me stay! School would send me mad, and I know I shall run away, or do something dreadful!"

"Have you written to your mother this mail?"

"No," said she, eyes cast down. "I—I couldn't write without knowing first what you have told her about me."

"I have told her nothing. I don't mean to tell her *anything*, Nadia," said he, looking very sad.

"Oh!" she breathed again.

"There are some things that are too hard to do. This is one of them, and I want to talk to you about it. First, tell me—were you writing to Wylber when I came in?"

"Yes," she murmured.

"Has he written to you?"

"No," said she, a flush rising to her brow. "He has been ill, I hear. He is very unhappy." Her lips quivered painfully.

"He has got to face life, and grow up into a man, now that he has learned what it is to suffer. You have got to make up your mind, Nadia, that there can be nothing between you and Wylber, *any more*. He must have realized it already, for he has to leave the country——"

"Bruno!" Her tone was indescribable. It was the cry of a wounded animal.

"Yes. His uncle has offered him a place at his side. It means ranching, and ultimate prosperity, for his uncle is a rich man and he has no sons to leave his property to, when he dies."

"Oh," wailed Nadia, covering her face with her hands. "I cannot bear it! I cannot bear it!"

"So he has been advised," Jasper continued, putting it as kindly as he could, "to start at once." He could have said that Wylber was "crazy to go,"

but refrained, out of consideration for her bleeding heart. She might be only fifteen, but she loved as women love.

"He has not written! He has not told me anything!" came in anguished tones from behind her hands.

"Which proves that he feels stricken with remorse for what has happened. If he has any honourable instincts left, he must be pretty miserable—and I am thinking that his prostration has more to do with remorse for his behaviour towards a very young girl, than grief at his loss. I can imagine, if he has come to his senses, that he would like to die." Jasper could not forget the episode with the pistol, and did not believe that Wylber had nearly killed himself only because he felt responsible for his father's death. It was *why* he had become responsible. What he had done! The full significance of it must have overpowered him when he awoke from his trance of passion, and stood face to face with his—crime. In Jasper's eyes, it was little else.

"I don't want him to feel unhappy. I want him to know that he must never be sorry because of me! How can I make you understand what he is to me, Bruno? I never knew, I did not understand, but now I know. I know that people can love each other so much that they would give their lives for them. I love Wylber just like that." Nadia burst into a storm of weeping through which he could catch the words, "but how can you sympathize!"

There was a hard lump in his throat, his eyes smarted, because he was sympathizing with her desperately.

"Why shouldn't you think that I sympathize?" he asked, when her sobs had quieted down.

"Because you have never loved like that!"

"Don't you think that there are even deeper and stronger loves that count no sacrifice too great for the loved one? But you are such a child!—such a child!"

"You think I am bad!—bad! Everybody would say so, for they don't understand!" She could not explain or express her meaning in any other way than to say they did not "understand."

"I don't think you are bad, Nadia."

"You *do!* and blame me cruelly. You think I should have been like one of God's angels. The angels don't love like we love!"

Had it not all been so tragic, he might have smiled, but nothing was farther from him than smiles.

"I don't blame you, Nadikins. I blame myself."

At the pet name, Nadia caught his hand and kissed it passionately. He had called her "Nadikins," so things could not be so bad after all!

"Oh, Bruno! Can you love me still, as before?" she pleaded. "Can you be sorry for me, and pity me, and think that there is no unhappiness in all the world like what I am suffering just now? What am I to do? What am I to *do*," she wailed, "if he goes away and I never see him any more?" Again she broke down into a storm of weeping, smothering her sobs in the pillow.

Jasper could do nothing but stroke the dark head gently, the red fires imprisoned in her tumbled locks, glinting in the lamp-light through his fingers. How many would understand, as he understood, and pity as he was pitying, the little girl weeping in her desolation? It was all too tragic!

"I shall always love you, Nadia. Love you, and stand by you whatever happens, for I know just how you feel." He then went on to hearten her with hope in the dim future. No one could look too far ahead, but it was quite possible that, one day, when she was considered a young lady, fully grown, she would meet Wylber again, and the old love become all the stronger for the long waiting. Such things happened! "And then we can easily foresee the end!" he concluded. She would have to be brave and face things, for there could be no talk of marrying now—nor even an engage-

ment. There were "understandings" that were unofficial engagements, and that was all that could be permitted. But it would be best suggested by Wylber himself. If he said nothing, was Nadia going to propose it? Jasper said that if he knew Wylber, he was too much upset, at present, to suggest anything. But time would prove the value of his feeling for the girl he had ruined. If he loved her truly, he would write to her from Canada and suggest it—that is, he would wish for an "understanding" that would lead to an engagement the moment they were both old enough to announce it to the world. Nadia must wait patiently and allow Wylber to recover wholly from the shock he had received, and when he could let himself think of things calmly and dispassionately, it would be a natural impulse for him to write to her. His very love would dictate a correspondence, and no one could object.

"Do you think he will, Bruno?" she asked, pitifully.

"I am sure he will. In his place, I would." Though Jasper knew that he would never, even at eighteen, have been so selfish and dishonourable as to have acted like Wylber. But all men were not made in the same mould.

Before he left her, Nadia was greatly comforted, though still very sad. Before him, she drew out the closely written pencilled sheets and tore them into ribbons. She had poured out her heart full of undying love to the boy, but—he had not answered her letter, and might not be in a fit state to appreciate another. She would be patient and wait.

"That's a brave girl!" said Jasper, stooping to kiss her brow "Sleep and grow strong. Perhaps, we'll also travel. I am thinking that a trip on the Continent will do you a world of good, and be just as educating as school."

And Nadia, reflecting on the fact that Wylber was no longer within reach, and that she would hate Basing-

brook without him, said she was so thankful! Bruno was too good to her.

III

Jasper's letter to Mrs. Donithorne explaining his reasons for removing Nadia from school, was a masterpiece of argument. He had come to the conclusion, that all things considered, it would do Nadia more good to travel in Europe than to return to school. For one thing, she had outgrown her strength, and another, had lost all inclination to work. You could lead a horse to the pond, but you could not make it drink. In his humble opinion, Nadia would never want a profession, and was so well advanced, that it was sheer imprisonment to insist on making her submit to that last term. Perhaps, next year they might consider Cheltenham, if Mrs. Donithorne came home. He strongly advised her to return if she could see her way to it next year, and settle this matter personally. In the meantime, as he and his mother were going to spend a few months abroad, they would take Nadia with them, and on their return consider the matter of " finishing "-masters, and accomplishments.

To this, his mother appended a postscript, hoping that dear Mrs. Donithorne would trust to Jasper's judgment, for he had Nadia's interests truly at heart.

Nadia, herself, welcomed the break in her life. As it was impossible to grieve continually, and equally impossible to stay on at Basingbrook, now that Wylber had left for Canada, she settled down bravely and tried, outwardly, to show that she was the same girl that had come home for the holidays, when in reality she could see no resemblance, except outwardly.

She learned two things—to suffer silently, and be patient. It was not like a child she waited and watched for the post, daily, before Wylber sailed for Canada. She could not understand why he did not send her even

a line to tell her that he would never forget her, and would, some day, return to make her his wife. Had he so written, she could conceive being happy. It is so easy to trust anyone you love greatly. But he left England without a word, as though it was true what Jasper told her about his undying remorse for loving her as he had no right to love her.

It was all beyond her understanding. She could not have gone away like that—without a line, even in acknowledgment of loving sympathy. Once she ventured to ask Jasper a question while curled up in the window of the library, pretending to read a book. Everything was in readiness for their journey, and Jasper was only making the final arrangements for his manager to carry on in his absence.

"Why does Nature make people want to belong to each other—as I belong to Wylber—if it isn't right? Why is it regarded as a sin, if God put such feelings in us?"

Jasper's pen hung fire and his heart gave a queer thud. What an amazing girl to put into frank language what older people shirked discussing.

"What do you know of such things, Nadia? What do you ascribe to Nature, and how far is God responsible?"

"Nature is God, Dr. Mary Payne told me when Mother let her explain everything to me about ourselves. That is, she said that God was behind Nature. To love is a natural impulse, isn't it? and because it is so wonderful, it is surely from God? When people love so much, then it cannot be wrong to choose to belong to each other."

Jasper began to understand what had happened. Dr. Mary Payne had laid the foundation of the present trouble, or surely Nadia would not have been so carried away.

"Love is certainly a wonderful instinct, a splendid passion," said Jasper, thoughtfully. "But God has

given us brains and an intelligence above the animals, Nadia, so that we can learn self-government, and conform to His laws. Jesus Christ approved of marriage. Without marriage this love would quickly degenerate to promiscuous mating." He felt that the only way to deal with Nadia's mind was to be equally frank. "It is conceivable that if marriage were abolished and a great tolerance permitted in the matter we are discussing, there would be a great proportion of unhappiness in the world, and considerable confusion. Very wise laws have been made for the good of communities, and no sane person would wish to see Free Love take the place of marriage, for it would mean the rapid degeneration of human nature and relationships. God is behind Nature, as you say; but *human* nature has a great deal of the devil in it, believe me."

"Then—Wylber and I have done very wrong. Perhaps you are right. I know the world would say I was a 'bad girl.' Am I bad, Bruno?"

"No, Nadia. Never that! You only made a bad mistake. One you will never make again, please God."

"I couldn't make it again, for I belong to Wylber. One day, God will let him marry me; if He doesn't, I don't know what will happen."

Jasper's head lowered as he cursed Wylber in his heart. He had no reply to make, for who could look into the years and say what would happen!

Silence. Jasper returned to his work and Nadia to her book which she was not reading. Her mind was too full of life's problems for it to concentrate for long on Pope's philosophy in his "Moral Essays."

CHAPTER V

TRYING TO FORGET

I

AFTER drifting about the Continent till October, Jasper and his small party of three arrived at Venice to stay at the Hôtel Francesca, on the Grand Canal. To Nadia, it had all been a strange experience—a kaleidoscope of sunshine, movement and colour, with the days so full of distraction that it was impossible to indulge in thought. There was incessant change, so that recent happenings seemed to lose their sense of reality and hide in the shadows of her mind like ghosts, to haunt her only by night.

Venice was a dream-world to her—and herself, someone else, visiting in Fairyland. There was nothing so quaint as the wide Lagoon and the net-work of side canals; the buildings rising out of the water like ships that never moved; the busy life all around her; and voices speaking in a musical language she did not understand.

She loved to lean on the balustrade of the terrace below the hotel and watch the gondolas on the Grand Canal, like black swans, gliding past. Jasper was often at her elbow, telling her things; and fellow-travellers and new acquaintances amused her with bright conversation and anecdote. Everyone was extraordinarily kind, so that she made many good friends and was able

to deceive herself into imagining that she was truly enjoying herself. Mrs. Noble was glad to hear her laugh again, for she was sorry that trouble should have arisen out of bringing the two young people together. But it was nothing to worry about, for Nadia was too much of a child, she believed, to carry lasting impressions. No one referred to Wylber, which was tactful, at least.

One morning, new arrivals came into the breakfast-room, and Nadia was surprised to see Mrs. Honeywell and Petal. Greetings were exchanged and the Honeywells were introduced to Mrs. Noble, who had never met them before. Petal looked several years younger than Nadia in her childish frocks, and blonde hair worn in a long plait to her waist, and Mrs. Honeywell confided to Mrs. Noble later, as they sat on the terrace, that it was the only way, nowadays, of distinguishing a flapper from young women. She showed that she disapproved of Nadia's forward manners and appearance, by making slighting remarks concerning her at every opportunity, and by watching her daughter like a cat a mouse, lest she should be persuaded by Nadia to disappear from under her mother's protecting wing.

" She is very pretty," said Mrs. Noble, admiringly, her eyes on Petal, who leant on the stone balustrade of the terrace with Nadia and Jasper, looking towards the Lagoon.

Mrs. Honeywell looked pleased, showing that she was very fond of her daughter.

" Believe me, Mrs. Noble, any other girl would, by now, have had her head turned by the way men look at her, and their tireless efforts to make our acquaintance. But my angel-child is so childlike and innocent, she shrinks from the attentions of men and never, if she can help it, will leave my side."

" Oh, but surely that can be overdone! They won't bite her. Think of the lot she misses—the glow of pleased vanity, the thrills of excitement at the sensation she creates! "

"Indeed, Petal has no vanity, and is very self-respecting. No man will ever take advantage of her. She knows how to keep men at a distance. You see, she is so young, that it is much the safest that she should be shy of men. Girls are her best companions, and I am very particular that she makes none but of my choosing."

"I see you have made quite a study of the subject. Nadia is a woman of the world by comparison."

"You are perfectly right. I think it so deplorable. Nadia's mother and I were in school together, and have always been very intimate; but, really, I have had to draw the line, of late years, because of Nadia who is so terribly modern and advanced in every way. I am positively nervous when the girls are together, alone."

At this moment, Nadia approached, wishing to know if the two ladies would like to visit the Piazza of S. Marco.

"Petal and I are dying to feed the pigeons, so Bruno says he'll take us."

"I would rather be excused," said Mrs. Noble. "I'll go another time. It is so pleasant to sit here and look at the boats on the canal. Perhaps Mrs. Honeywell would care about it?"

"I think Petal and I will wait a bit. I am not feeling up to standing about. Venice does not seem to agree with me. We have been here a week and have changed our hotel twice, for the food upsets me so. It's all the garlic they use, I am sure——"

"Oh, Mother, do let me go with Mr. Noble and Nadia!" Petal coaxed. "I should love it!"

"Wouldn't you rather wait for your mother to feel better, my angel-child?"

"We have had such a dull time! and now that we have found friends, you don't want me to go with them!"

"I'll take care of her," said Jasper.

"So shall I," said Nadia.

Petal hung over her mother, begging so hard, that to have continued to refuse would have been churlish, so Mrs. Honeywell yielded, looking hurt that Petal should think of finding pleasure apart from her devoted parent.

"Well, then, I'll come too," said she, rising with an effort and turning to go indoors. "We have never had our pleasures separately, and I don't like to begin now."

Petal, having been reared to selfishness through her mother's sacrifices, watched her mother prepare for the trip in the gondola though unfit for the outing, unmoved.

"I don't want you to come if you are not feeling well. Why can't I go with them?"

"You know why," said her mother, pinning on her hat before the mirror. "I distrust Nadia, and I don't know Mr. Noble intimately, though Mrs. Donithorne always said he was all right. Still, as you are only a child——"

Petal sighed impatiently, wishing she could grow up quickly. Grown-up people had so much better times.

"——it is my duty to see no harm comes to you."

"What *could* happen to me?"

As her mother had no answer ready, nothing more was said. Mrs. Honeywell sat in the gondola, a martyr to dyspepsia, and on the stone bench at the base of the Campanile while the girls played like little children with the pigeons, trying to forget her indisposition by complaining of foreign travel to Jasper whom she afterwards thought the most sympathetic of men.

She decided before the afternoon was over that she liked him, for he had honest eyes. She had never met anyone so considerate and attentive to middle-age, and was glad to take his arm when returning to the gondola.

Mrs. Honeywell was so much worse for her effort, that she was persuaded to go to bed for a day and trust

in Providence and Jasper Noble for her angel-child's well-being. Mrs. Noble reassured her many times on the subject, and offered to sit with her while her daughter was touring the town sight-seeing, which she had been unable to do since her arrival, owing to her parent's indisposition.

"I have never felt so poorly in my life," said Mrs. Honeywell, anxiously. "It must be Italy. I shall have to return home if this goes on. In Rome I was in bed two days, and Petal had no fun at all."

"It is very disappointing to be ill when you are travelling to enjoy yourself."

Petal interested Mrs. Noble exceedingly, for she had heard something of the way in which she had been brought up. At the hotel, she saw her as a queer mixture of shyness and smug conceit. She was vain enough to enjoy the fact that she was pretty, but too self-conscious to bear being looked at. The least thing brought the colour in a flood to her face, and she was generally tongue-tied in company, having very little to say for herself. If introduced to a strange man, she was almost *gauche* in her replies to his amenities, showing that she had too long depended on her mother to help her out, and, now, left to her own resources, was confused and overcome. With Nadia alone, she was natural, but Nadia had little patience with her childishness.

"She bores me stiff," was the girl's verdict, "for she has no conversation except on the silliest trifles, and yet she will give her opinions, borrowed from her mother, as if no other is worth considering."

"She is the most unattractive child I have ever met," said Jasper.

"I think her mother is a fool," said Mrs. Noble. "But, poor thing! she seemed certainly ill and should hurry back home. It will be awkward if she gets worse. Though, what worries her most, is the thought that her 'angel-child' will be at the mercy of wolves in

sheep's clothing; or get contaminated by Nadia. Why has she such a poor opinion of Nadia, I want to know! "

"Because," said Nadia, her ears reddening, "when we were both small I happened to mention that I had assisted at the *accouchment* of our cat."

"My dear! What was your mother about?" Mrs. Noble was shocked that Nadia could speak so openly in Jasper's presence, though Jasper himself only laughed—these modern girls!

Nadia had forgotten that Mrs. Noble was not in a position to know that she and Jasper often discussed things that were quite as embarrassing, and thought nothing of the fact—the bond between them being, as far as she was concerned, intimate and sexless.

"It was quite an accident, I assure you, happening in transit across the kitchen floor while poor Pansy was being hustled at the end of the under-housemaid's broom," said Nadia, in explanation. "My part in the affair was that of startled spectator. By the time I could take a saucer of milk to the box-room in the attic, where the cat was exiled, the whole family had arrived. Mrs. Honeywell owed me a grudge for describing to Petal what I had seen."

"Naturally," said Mrs. Noble, a little scandalized.

II

Petal, emancipated while her mother was confined to her room, was like a lost sheep. She clung to Mrs. Noble or Jasper, looking upon him as an elderly bore, and flushed every time she found herself being stared at. She was at a loss with men, as she had no understanding of their masculine ways, or any ideas she could share with them. They were the incarnation of mystery to her, and, to be left alone with a man, would have given her panic for no reason she could prescribe but

that of regarding it vaguely as an impropriety. At a *thé dansant*, in the lounge, she would dance only with Nadia, as it confused her miserably to be in close proximity to a man or to be obliged to submit to his arm round her waist.

"What's the matter with you?" Nadia asked, impatiently. "Doesn't everyone dance with men?" She herself never refused a chance, but enjoyed Jasper's steps most, as she was used to them.

"I know—I know!" said Petal, nervous and irritable. "It's just that I hate them to touch me."

"Why?" persisted Nadia, quite unable to account for such nonsense.

"I dunno. I'd rather run a mile. It's horrid."

"Even Bruno?" Nadia felt moved to laughter.

"Not him!—he's old."

At this, Nadia was so amused that she had to tell Jasper.

"She doesn't mind you, because you are 'too old.' Young men make her feel horrid. Can you account for her?"

Jasper said she was only a prude, and the reflection of her mother's intellect. Having been kept a baby too long, she was like a shipwrecked mariner on an uncharted island, expecting to be devoured by wild animals and scared of bogies. Mentally, he believed that, whereas Nadia had been too thoroughly enlightened by that rampant psychologist, Dr. Mary Payne, Petal was left groping in the dark too long. Did no one understand the happy medium?

Something of the sort he expressed to his mother when they were alone, and Mrs. Noble ventured to make a suggestion to Mrs. Honeywell the next time she sacrificed herself to sit with the distressed lady.

"Petal is too shy with men. Such a pity, for she is very pretty, and shyness spoils her. It is a terrible handicap. Don't you think you should encourage her to mix more naturally with the other sex?"

"Indeed? I am not in agreement with you," said Mrs. Honeywell, "for Petal is very young. When she is older, she will get over her shyness quite naturally. At present, I am not anxious for her to have much to do with the opposite sex. She must be of a marriageable age before she is exposed to the possibility of attracting lovers. I am perfectly content to have her as she is, and under my eye—so to speak," she added, since Petal was under her friends' eyes at the moment, being shepherded by Jasper whom she believed to be an exceptional being. Lady Donithorne knew what she was about when she placed Nadia under his guardianship, and his mother was a great help. "I have very high ideals about girls, and a very poor opinion of men. It is my prayer that my angel-child should marry a good, God-fearing man, no matter his circumstances—Petal won't be penniless—for, then, she will be truly blessed. The less girls' heads are stuffed with romance and sentiment, and the less they are allowed to read of the present-day literature, the more likely are they to appeal to good men and be married suitably. There isn't a decent man who admires the modern girl with her sophisticated ways and immodest manners."

"But, surely, you mean to give her some idea, before you marry her off, as to the obligations of matrimony?" Mrs. Noble was thinking of Petal, unsophisticated and ignorant, going on her honeymoon with this hypothetical, God-fearing person.

"How could you suggest such a thing, my dear Mrs. Noble? I could never broach such matters to one so innocent. That will be for her husband to do. Men much prefer their brides to be innocent."

"You seem anxious to subscribe to the natural egotism of man, Mrs. Honeywell. I am sorry, but I do not sympathize."

"We each have a right to our own opinions. It is good enough for me that our mothers and grandmothers

had no other principle to guide them in the rearing of their daughters, and it answered very well."

Mrs. Noble wondered where she had heard that Mrs. Honeywell and her late husband had " not got on "? He was reputed to have been unfaithful and anxious for a divorce, though little Mrs. Honeywell was considered a beauty in her youth; and that she was stubborn in denying him his freedom, since *she* had no intention of marrying again.

It was a funny world!

That evening, as Nadia was getting into bed, a light tap at her door announced Petal, a timid visitor in a dressing-gown over her modest " nighty."

" I have a little room next to Mother's, and she believes I am asleep, but as I am dying to talk to you, I came by the passage. Oh, Nadia, I do envy you! I wish I could feel your ease in company."

" There is nothing about me any girl need envy," said Nadia, with a pathetic droop of her lips. It was always when she was alone that all her trouble came back to dream about and grieve over till sleep gave her a reprieve.

" You are grown up, I mean! We are the same age, and you feel, to me, years older! Let me get into bed with you. I so want to tell you things."

They snuggled into the blankets, side by side, and Petal prattled on:

" I have been dying to ask you something I could never ask anyone else! " blushing in the dark and pressing her hands to her doll-like face. " We travelled as far as Rome with the Langhams—your people know them slightly. Well—there is a young man—Mrs. Langham's brother, and he terrified me by always wanting to get me alone. We stayed at the same hotel, and when Mother had one of her bad attacks, I was left in Mrs. Langham's charge. She's a real cat—making Mother think her so pious and good, when all the time she was having a laugh at us and encouraging

her brother to annoy me. She took me to Tivoli for the afternoon—there was another man, so that we were four, and, of course, I fell to her brother! It was awful!" Nadia could imagine the situation and smiled. "It was dark when we were returning in two cars, and though there was plenty of room for me with her, she must needs give me to her brother to look after. I would not dare tell Mother, or she would go straight back to England lest such a thing should happen again! but, in the car, on the way back, Horace Langham told me all sorts of things to make me scared to death," Petal gasped.

"What sort of things?"

"That I was terribly pretty and that he was just dying to make love to me—oh!—and he put his arm round me and hugged me tight. I nearly died! And though I begged of him to let me go, he wouldn't, but kept hugging me all the way along till I wanted to cry. My heart beat so hard I nearly suffocated, and then—and then—HE KISSED ME! . . . He did! Right on the mouth—the *beast!*"

"Why didn't you hit him?"

"I—I don't know. I thought I was fainting. He kissed and kissed me, and only stopped when I cried so hard that he thought I was going to make a scene. Oh, I hate him so! And now—now I don't know what's going to happen!"

"Why—what do you mean?"

"I haven't forgotten about babies," she said in awe-stricken tones, "and I thought I would ask you, is there any fear of my getting one after all that?"

Nadia gave a smothered laugh.

"Petal!—you are silly! He only kissed you?"

"You heard me say so? What worse *could* he do?"

Nadia immediately put her mind at rest.

"What made you think that such a miracle could happen?"

"I'll tell you," said Petal, her voice showing her

immeasurable relief. "I never forgot a conversation I overheard between my governess and the housemaid before they knew I was in the room. One of the maid's girl-friends had had a baby, it seemed, because she was 'walking out' with someone or another—a bad man, they said—and I heard my governess say, 'That comes of all that hugging and kissing in parks.' So, ever since Horace Langham kissed and hugged me, I—don't laugh, Nadia! It is so unkind! You make me feel such a fool."

"You are, Petal. An awful fool!" Nadia, however, refrained from enlightening her.

III

As a pale, Italian doctor was of opinion, in broken English, that Mrs. Honeywell was suffering from the after effects of gastric 'flu, she was obliged to keep her bed and allow Petal to see Venice under Jasper's ægis. He took both the girls about to places of interest, and proved a very efficient guide. Petal, however, declared that sight-seeing was a bore. She liked best to sit in a gondola and glide over the canals, which made her realize that she was indeed in Venice. Picture galleries and churches were everywhere. In Rome she had seen so many that they were all mixed up in her memory, the church of the Capucin monks, alone, leaving a distinct impression on her mind, because of the skulls and bones ornamenting the cellars. As to picture galleries, the great masters seemed to paint all alike. How could anyone tell one style from another? She thought that Veronese, alone, was worthy of distinction, because of the wonderful draperies he painted, and the effect of his blues. She yawned all through the Doges' Palace, and squeaked nervously while visiting the prison

dungeons across the Bridge of Sighs, her fingers clutching at Nadia in anxiety lest she should be left behind.

They toured narrow waterways where Venice looked, all at once, squalid and unsavoury owing to the green slime of the walls where the houses rose from the canals, and the dirty garments fluttering from upper windows in the breeze. They made acquaintance with various places of interest in the town linked up by alley-ways called "Calli," and became acquainted with Paula's bead and glass shop, from which they emerged with ropes of glass beads as souvenirs. It was quaint to pass down the narrow lanes where Venice did a brisk trade with visiting foreigners, and shopkeepers clamoured to be favoured expressing their eagerness to accept English paper-money, which, Jasper said, made him feel very proud of being an Englishman. In a shabby little spot in the parish of S. Maria del Carmine, they saw the *popolino* enjoying itself alfresco fashion, seated on their doorsteps to breathe the fresh air, all chattering in their soft dialect. On the Rialto, they purchased a few more trifles as souvenirs, and returning to the Piazza S. Marco, had tea at Florian's to the strains of *Il Trovatore*. There were crowds of English and American tourists seated at the little tables in the Arcade, and the hum and buzz of conversation made a low bass accompaniment to the delicious music.

"Why don't they give us some jazz tunes?" said Petal, who had recovered her nerves and was beginning to enjoy herself.

"You won't find Italian musicians play jazz except by special request. They don't consider it music," said Jasper. "They revel in opera, and the blare of negro dances leaves them cold."

Just then there was a noisy altercation between a waiter and a customer at one of the tables, nearby, and it was discovered that an important little gentleman, of the "self-made" stamp, was stolidly refusing to be "done."

"I'm damned if I'll pay a lira more than is just," said he to the lady who was presumably his wife, and the entire arcade gave him their attention. "You returned that ice as it had wine in it—stinking of it—so why should I be charged?" He puffed his cheeks and inserted a fat cigar between his lips. "Let them go to the devil, say I."

But the waiter had no intention of effacing himself. He was rendered, if anything, more stubborn, and persisted in presenting the bill, backed by a stream of volubility and many gesticulations, not a word being intelligent to the Englishman.

"I suppose," said the lady pacifically, "because I tasted it——"

"Tut-tut! We did not ask for that sort of ice-cream, so it is their loss. They have no right to bring the wrong thing and then be so arbitrary as to charge us! Let them go to blazes." He turned a deaf ear to the waiter and smoked stolidly. "*Je ne comprend pas!*" he cried, with a wave of one large hand, when the man would not be dismissed.

The waiter immediately resorted to fluent French, which passed over the obdurate Englishman's head, proving that his knowledge of French was limited to a few useful phrases.

"On principle," said the Englishman, "I refuse to subscribe to injustice."

Exit waiter in a pale fury.

"He's gone to call the management," said a voice in the neighbourhood.

"Dear me!" said the wife, anxiously.

"Let them call the whole damned establishment. They are not going to extract a single lira from me that I do not consider their just due. These foreigners are confoundedly arbitrary, and want a lesson."

He puffed at his cigar, and glared about him for sympathy which nobody offered, though everybody was interested in the outcome of the argument.

" That sort of thing lets us down horribly," said a man to Jasper.

" I regret to say there is a class of Englishman who frequently does that abroad," said Jasper. " You'll observe that he also invariably regards people as ' foreigners ' even in their native land."

" I suppose we are really the foreigners? " said Petal, surprised.

" And tolerated," said Nadia, " because we are so useful to trade."

" I feel nervous! " said Petal. " Suppose there is a row? "

" Oh, don't be a coward! " cried Nadia, " let's see the finish. Do you think they'll make him pay, Bruno? "

" He's liable for it, whatever he may think."

" Because she tasted it? "

" She admits so much."

Everyone about them was discussing the irate gentleman's liability when the waiter returned with two others, who answered truculence with truculence and grew threatening in their demeanour.

" Oh, do pay, and let's go," said the wife.

" Pay? " cried the Englishman, looking purple with indignation, " it's arbitrary and unjust. I'm damned if I will! "

Immediately, it was seen that the Englishman had risen and was accompanying the two waiters to the office that the argument might be settled out of sight. Indignant and determined, he meant to face the entire management to assert his principle and teach them all a lesson. Never having learned to yield a disagreeable point gracefully in sportsman-like fashion, he was seen striding between two waiters with a third in the rear, till the doors of the restaurant closed upon him.

" What a fool! " said one.

" It's as good as a play! " giggled a woman.

"What'll happen now?" asked Nadia of her guardian.

"If he persists," said Jasper, "it is quite possible that he will be arrested as a defaulter. However trifling the amount, a principle is at stake, a precedent liable to be established, so they won't budge an inch. If arrested by the police, he'll be locked up in gaol where he might remain for weeks before his case comes up for trial. They have their own system in such matters on the Continent, and are absolutely autocratic."

The Englishman's wife, who had heard what he said, here turned a pair of frightened and tearful eyes on Jasper.

"I do beg of you, sir, to speak to my husband. He does not know all this. Please go after him, I beseech you!"

"Oh, don't let yourself get mixed up in this!" cried Petal, in scared tones.

"Bruno speaks Italian like a native," said Nadia, "and might be able to do some good."

Jasper rose and made his way towards the office, followed by many eager eyes, and Nadia attempted to comfort the agitated wife.

"Don't be alarmed, nothing will happen. Mr. Noble knows exactly what to say and do. He has wonderful tact."

"It would be terrible if they arrest my husband!" said the lady. "We haven't enough money to be detained in this dreadful place! Oh, I do hope he will be able to do something!"

"I am quite sure he will. There is nothing to fear."

"What a much-ado about nothing!" was said at one of the tables in the vicinity. "To see all that flourishing of arms and glaring of eyes, you would almost believe that a man had been caught in the act of picking a pocket!"

"It is the Latin temperament. Tempers on a hair

trigger—fireworks let off at a moment's notice, and, the next, all is peace and joy."

"For downright, piggish obstinacy, insular narrow-mindedness, and the habit of treating the rest of the world as inferior, commend me to the untravelled Englishman."

Presently, Jasper returned, followed by the florid hero of the occasion, released from "durance vile," and looking utterly disgusted with foreigners and foreign psychology.

"Did he pay up?" asked the girls in a breath.

"Rather! When he realized what was going to be done with him he very soon got the money out. I found him in the centre of a rabid crowd of Italians who looked as if they were ready to lynch him, repeating his determination 'not to be done.' Two uniformed members of the police force looked on, waiting for the word to take him into custody. If they had laid a hand on him, the whole machinary of the law would have been put in motion, and I could have done nothing for him. Fortunately they looked as if they meant business, so he listened to reason, and the moment he paid, the scene collapsed. The crowd melted and everyone looked pleased. It was quite comic."

IV

That evening Jasper took the girls to listen to a concert on the water, and Mrs. Honeywell felt aggrieved. How quickly a mother's feelings were of no account! Petal never wished to leave her side before, but Nadia had a peculiar influence over her child, and was weaning her from her loyalty to her parent. Whatever happened, she would get up on the morrow and arrange to return to England. As long as she stayed in a garlic-

eating land, she knew she would never recover her digestion.

" The song-boats are part of the glamour of Venice in the season, and no one likes to miss them," said Mrs. Noble who had so often enjoyed the experience, that she preferred her comfortable chair and early bed.

" Oh, that's what it is! Glamour—and moonshine! Don't I know? Men and girls spooning, and my Petal having her eyes opened to all that sort of folly."

She kept awake till the party returned, and asked Petal how she had enjoyed herself.

" It was pretty enough—the song-boat all decorated, and with coloured lanterns hanging about, and people singing. But it was dull music. I don't care for operatic stuff," Petal said, with a yawn. " And besides, it was chilly. Nadia felt sick because the gondola kept bobbing about in the waves made by the launches in passing, and the gondoliers would persist in chattering like apes so that one could hardly hear the voices."

" Were there heaps of other boats? "

" Such a crush that it took ages squeezing out when we tried to get free and come away. I saw a man kissing a girl in a gondola. As the moon was covered by a cloud, he started all that, and one did not know which way to look. I suppose they were engaged."

" Horrible form to do all that sort of thing in public! " Mrs. Honeywell did not know what else to say. " Of course, you now feel you can do without your poor mother, she might as well die and get out."

" Oh! How can you say such a thing! " cried Petal, conscience-stricken and alarmed. " You are not very ill, Mother? Say you are not very ill? "

" I don't know what's the matter, but I seem never to be rid of pain. We must return home, darling. I'll pack to-morrow, with your help."

" I promise not to go anywhere again, if it makes

you think things like that, darling," said Petal, frightened to see the drawn look in her mother's face. "Perhaps, we had better go back. Your own doctor will give you the right treatment and make you well."

"That's what I am thinking."

CHAPTER VI

VICARIOUS ATONEMENT

I

IT was true that Nadia had felt desperately unwell as the boats rocked and bumped into each other in the crush round the song-boat. All day, she had been fighting a feeling of faintness and hysteria, quite unknown to the others. However, she made no complaint for fear of spoiling the fun for Petal. She meant to bear it as long as she could with the help of the cool night air on her face to revive her. She cuddled against Jasper's shoulder, wrapped in her rug, as he had a way of making her feel safe and comforted. Whatever might happen, she could always count on him.

Passing clouds fitfully obscured the moon, plunging the Lagoon into moving shadows, which, at other moments, sparkled with a myriad jewels as its surface was rippled by a passing breeze or disturbed by motor-launches hurrying to and fro. Across the Grand Canal, the lights of Venice made points of brilliance, their reflections curling in the water below, and the Campanile could be seen rearing its stately column dimly into the moonlit sky. There were many quaint sounds in the air —the cry of a frightened seagull; the call of one boatman to another in the distance; the shrill whistle of a launch as it throbbed its way along; and, through all,

the soft thrumming of guitars and the mellow tones of Italian singers, while wavelets lapped the sides of the gondolas, making a music all their own.

It was Venice at the entrance to the Grand Canal, with the church of the Della Salute a dark silhouette against the heavens; the smell of the brine from the Lagoon, and other smells peculiar to Venice; the music, the moonlight; and gondoliers' voices raised in tuneful argument to show their indifference to a class of singers that even they could despise.

"Feeling better?" Jasper asked, lowering his head to Nadia's. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing much. It will pass," she replied, deeply touched, for Jasper's voice sounded full of solicitude. She was unaccountably hysterical—probably, because of the romance of that Venetian night. She loved all things that were beautiful, for which reason she had come so near worshipping Wylber who was a god-like being; and now, it was impossible to be reconciled to the thought that he had gone out of her life forever.

Forever was a terrible word. It meant eternity!

The past month and a half had felt like a dream of eternity without word or line from Wylber. Did it mean that he had ceased to want her?

Did it? Did it? . . .

The agonizing fear that he was teaching himself to forget her, clutched at her heart, making her smile forced; her laugh joyless.

Jasper had said in one of their illuminating talks that Nature depended upon change. Without change there would not be evolution. It was evolution when young things grew, and when minds widened their perspective, changing all the time. Even lovers ceased to love, or loved again. It was an immutable law of life, this eternal change of outlook and expansion. It was how Time healed all wounds: smiles returned to sad faces; gladness to bereaved hearts.

Jasper was stern when once he had spoken of

Wylber's love for her, and the things he said, often returned to her mind:

"Self-sacrifice is the test of true love."

"Love that seeks self-gratification at the cost of another, is akin to the beasts, and of a lower order."

"Love that is all passion, is like a tree decayed at the roots, therefore short-lived."

In whatever category he would have placed Wylber's love, Nadia knew that it would not effect her feeling for him, for she loved him blindly, and would till she died.

She listened to the thrum-thrum of the guitars and the voices rising and falling on the night air, and pressed her hand to her heart. Jasper looked down and thought she was looking strangely frail and piteous, whereupon his heart melted within him as it was wont to do at every hint of her unhappiness which she was striving to hide from the eyes of the world.

"Would you like me to tell the gondolier to take us to the hotel?" he asked, anxiously.

"I'll wait for a bit. It is nice here, if the boats would only be still."

But the gondolas rocked and bumped as the waves from a passing launch swept landwards, and the lapping of the wavelets against the sides flipped-flapped, while a gay chorus sang "Finicule Finicula."

"If you are feeling sea-sick," said Petal, "take your mind off it. It's the only way to last out."

"I am never sea-sick," said Nadia. "I dare say it's something of what your mother has got."

"I hope not!" said Jasper. "Stay in bed all to-morrow. You have been overdoing things. I blame myself for not taking it easy. We are not bound to time."

"One way not to be sea-sick," said Petal, hopefully, returning to the charge, "is to try to think of something worse than sea-sickness, like having to take castor oil, plain——"

"Oh, please don't!" moaned Nadia.

" It would cure you, believe me."

" I shouldn't be surprised," said Jasper. " On the principle that ' like cures like.' It would be over in a moment."

" *Please*, Bruno, I think I'll go back."

So the boat was pushed out of the scrum in time to avoid the third visit from the Italian M.C. with the money-bag, who was travelling from boat to boat, cheerfully optimistic as to results.

II

Nadia's indisposition, which had spoilt her evening at the song-boat, did not pass when she entered the hotel and retired to her room. However, once curled up in bed, she tried to forget, in sleep, the horrible nightmare-thought which had begun, of late, to dog her waking hours. She had acquired enough knowledge from Dr. Mary Payne to be getting frightened concerning herself.

Nor did it improve her feelings the next morning to find that she could not raise her head from the pillow without faintness and nausea.

This was dreadful. Oh! Nadia shut her eyes and buried her face in the pillow, shivering from head to foot.

Why was life so revengeful?

Why did God allow such things to happen?

If her fears were established, she knew she would have to kill herself. She would not want to live.

When Mrs. Noble visited her at Jasper's instigation, she suggested a doctor, but panic seized Nadia at the bare thought, and it could not be broached again for fear of making her worse.

She was better, however, in the afternoon, only deadly white, with dark shadows under her eyes.

"Indigestion," said Mrs. Noble, in her blunt fashion. "Too many late nights and racketing."

Jasper was concerned and anxious, but ready to believe that there was a very simple explanation for the child's breakdown. He was not surprised that she had, at last, given in, for he had wondered at her courage and strength of mind that had kept her going so long.

All the world might condemn her, but he could not. She was the same lovable kid he had seen growing up from infancy, who had crept into his heart and would be there for all time. The blame was his.

His the blame and the atonement.

She little knew of his sleepless nights, the anguish and the regrets. His little Nadikins, whose life had gone wrong at the start, would need all his protection and devotion to win her back to safety and happiness!

"I am thinking," said his mother, when it was decided to delay calling in the doctor, "that our stay abroad for so long must be a great expense, Jasper. Douglas Hammond was so pessimistic about the farm and was hinting at a large overdraft. It concerns me to know how you are managing, for Nadia's allowance couldn't cover all you are doing for her."

She had a small annuity of her own which was settled on her for life, and could not have afforded to live at hotels on the Continent, had Jasper not paid the bills.

A twinge of anxiety passed over his face, and for a moment he was at a loss how to reply.

"I shall manage. Don't let it distress you."

"I suppose, when Nadia goes back home, she will have to have masters and take a finishing course, if you are determined not to send her to school any more. It seems that Nadia gets a great deal of her own way. I don't know any other girl who could get away with things as she does. By rights, she should have returned to school, and we shouldn't have given in to all that

hysteria over Wylber. Heaps of young people get sentimental over each other, but they don't upset their careers or finish their schooling because of it. I see nothing to have indulged her about. She would soon have given in, if you had been firm."

Jasper murmured something about highly-sensitive natures and no two girls being alike.

"Well, I only hope you are not being drawn into heavy expenses on her account, for it would be monumental folly to cripple the farm that Nadia might get a holiday."

"I know what I am about," said Jasper, albeit uneasily, and the argument was dropped.

Nadia never knew how she went through that evening, at one time determined to be hopeful, and at another, plunged into the depths of despair. Mrs. Honeywell was leaving the next day for London, and they saw very little of her and Petal except at meals, as the business of packing kept them confined to their rooms; for which Nadia was glad, as she felt that her nerves would never have stood the inanities of this doll-like friend of her childhood.

Nadia was well in all but her mind, when she went to bed that night. Mentally, she was unable to deceive herself that all was well with her, though, for the time being, she had recovered. Gradually, she had marshalled the pros and the cons of her case, and was steeped in silent panic.

Early the following morning, she gave up all hope, and turned her face to the wall.

She had all the symptoms she had heard belonged to women when they began to suspect they were pregnant, and thought the best thing that could happen to her, was sudden death.

She a child still in years, and . . . !

It was unspeakable. The horror of it!—for she was considered too young to be married. Now that Wylber was thousands of miles away, she was lost, indeed!

All the world would know. Her mother would be bowed to the earth with shame, her father would surely turn her out of his house. Women were outcasts who became unmarried mothers!

Nadia began to cry desperately, hopelessly. What a terrible Nemesis to overtake her! And Wylber? Was he not to share her trouble at all?—to sympathize? —to stand by her whatever happened?

Wylber was now in Canada, beginning a new life with all of the old swept behind him. He was teaching himself to forget her. He wanted to forget her, for it would be many years before he could think of taking a wife.

What was she to do? Oh, what was she to do?

When Mrs. Noble should hear the truth (which was inevitable) in due course, she would also turn her back on her. Every decent person considered it the proper thing to do, just as if her sin was the worst in the Decalogue. Who had she hurt so much as herself?

Herself, and the child she would bring into the world—if she did not die under the ordeal.

How hard the world was!

She then remembered Jasper, and thanked God for him.

Jasper who had said he would stand by her.

Jasper who loved her like a father and mother.

Jasper who had the divine spirit of God!

Virtually, she had no one but Jasper, and she wanted to crawl to him and kiss his feet.

When Mrs. Noble had seen Nadia, she went to her son with a puzzled face and said she did not know what to make of the child. She was apparently sickening for something, and it was their duty to get a doctor, only Nadia had taken it into her head to dislike foreign doctors so much, that to persist might give her a rise of temperature.

"I'll take a look at her myself," said Jasper, and

putting out the pipe he was smoking, he went up to Nadia's room.

Mrs. Noble found Mrs. Honeywell, in the lounge, waiting for her packages to be brought downstairs, and Petal administering to her comfort. Both were cloaked and hatted and ready to leave, their hired gondola awaiting them at the steps of the terrace.

They filled in a little time discussing Nadia's symptoms.

"Undoubtedly it is Venice," said Mrs. Honeywell. "A gastric attack just like mine. Have you seen the state of the canal at the back? One passes right under our windows, and believe me, I am amazed that we are not all ill!"

"I have so often been to Venice," said Mrs. Noble, "and I have never suffered. It is surprisingly healthy, I am told. Only we are advised not to eat fish, except at the Lido."

"You have been very fortunate, dear Mrs. Noble. I was talking to that American woman who wears a new dress every evening at dinner, and she said that Venice is absurdly over-rated. It is a dirty, insanitary town, mildewed and unsavoury. It might be called picturesque because of its waterways and quaint shops, but what is the use of picturesqueness and fancy names beginning with Via This and Via That, and Rios and Piazzas, when the houses shut out the sunlight on the narrow canals and the basements opening on to the water's edge are damp and rat-infested? The Grand Canal may be very fine with its Rialto and hotels, the Doges' Palace, and the Della Salute! But it all puts me in mind of a whited sepulchre."

Mrs. Honeywell's condition of health had indeed disillusioned her. There was nothing like Old England, after all!

"I do hope you will have a pleasant journey back," said Mrs. Noble. "When I think of those all-night journeys in Continental trains, generally so crowded

and stuffy, I wonder at our courage in coming again."

"It's perfectly unspeakable!" said Mrs. Honeywell. "We travelled second, as we were advised that it is quite usual, but we regretted it every moment of the time! As we delayed to book sleepers, we had to sit up packed like sardines all the way, and there was a French baby as far as Turin with young parents who fed it on coffee! I ask you! The baby cried all night, and we did not dare to open a chink of the windows, though there were several English in the compartment. The French being in the majority, there was nearly a scene every time we wanted a breath of air. What did they suppose fresh air could do to them?"

"It was fun, though," said Petal, "scrambling for coffee at five in the morning at a wayside station. An English parson filled our thermos for us. It was so kind of him. But the excitement when he was nearly left behind, scrambling into the last carriage and having to walk right through the train!"

"Oh, the smell of that carriage! Never again," sighed Mrs. Honeywell.

"But what journeys we had to get to the restaurant-car every time."

"I shall never forget the discomforts we endured on those appalling trains in Italy. Talk of dust and insanitary conditions! They may be wonderful engineers, and build marvellous tunnels, but their trains are beyond description, rattling and jolting like nothing on earth! I wonder we were able to walk to meals."

"I hated, most of all, having to pass through the first-class compartments, where they had drawing-room chairs and looked so comfortable and superior. The men all stared so, and the women looked at us down their noses, just as if we had no right to want any luncheon."

"They are nothing like our Pullmans at home."

"I must say," said Mrs. Noble, "that we do put up with a lot of inconvenience if we try to do the trip economically. Everyone cannot afford to waste money unnecessarily, and the sleepers are not cheap."

III

In the meantime, Jasper, seated on the edge of Nadia's bed, found very little difficulty in drawing the truth from her. She was too anxious about herself to shut him out of her confidence. Was he not both father and mother to her? Besides, he knew everything about her, so might as well know the little more!

Jasper's heart stood still. Her cry of "How I wish I could die!" told him more than anything else, and the shock was paralysing.

In the beginning, he had thought of such a ghastly possibility, but had dismissed the idea, believing that the Fates would be kind, since she was so very young; but it seemed that she was not to escape the consequences of her madness, and that he had yet a greater responsibility to shoulder.

What was he to do?

If she was making no mistake, then his poor little girl would be dishonoured before all the world. How was it possible for him to hide her folly and sin any longer?

His Nadikins! His little Bunny-rabbit! who used to cuddle to his breast and be put to bed, with her loving arms round his neck, and tender assurances that she would marry Bruno "when she grew up." Tears sprang to his eyes; a lump in his throat threatened to choke him. How could he let her be torn to pieces by the wolves of society? her good name be blasted for ever in the sight of all, her own people crush her with their condemnation?

Jasper thought of his own mother, and knew that she was the last person to be told. Such an act as Nadia's was inconceivable to her in the pride of her virtue and inexperience of life. He could not even guess at how she would regard the girl, and how treat her.

To think of his mother despising Nadia, was not to be contemplated. She must never know.

Nobody must ever know.

He made up his mind there and then, that whatever the cost to himself, nobody should get to know of Nadia's shame.

Nadia herself was beginning to realize her position before the world, and still thought that the sin of loving too much was unfairly dealt with in proportion to the sins of society. But she was frightened and helpless in the face of the Nemesis that had overtaken her. The complications ahead frightened Jasper, and he was dumb with the need to think and act sanely.

"It is a desperate situation, Nadia," said he, "but we've got to face it. No good being cowardly, and wishing for death to make a way out. It would be an escape for you alone, but would not spare others the shame and the burden. You have all at once leapt from childhood into womanhood, and must now think like a woman and help me to find a way out of this that will spare your parents a deep and abiding humiliation. In their position, it would be a frightful calamity for things to get known. We must therefore make some arrangement. I shall have to consider what is best to be done and talk it over with you later. In the meantime, I would like to wait a while so as to be very sure you are not mistaken."

"I am not mistaken. Oh, Bruno, there's no such luck for me!" Nadia sobbed hopelessly. "Every way I look at it, I can only see suffering and disaster. I shall be forced to live a life of lies and deceit if no one must know. My baby, if it is born and I live,

will have to be hidden. I have thought it all out, and there isn't a gleam of brightness anywhere."

She had thought it all out like a woman. The child Nadia was no more, and Jasper, looking at the slim shape of her, the child-like face, uncreased and adorable in his eyes, suffered hideously. There was murder in his heart towards the boy who was responsible, and who would go scot free.

"We all have to pay the price of things," said he. "But there is no looking backward. We have to make the best of life under all circumstances, and deal with every phase as it comes. Just leave the burden of your trouble on me. Don't forget that you always have Bruno, whatever happens."

"Oh, why are you so good to me?" she exclaimed, snatching his hand and carrying it to her lips in a gust of loving gratitude.

"Because you have always been, and will always be, my little Nadikins—the child of my heart."

"Oh, Bruno! I don't deserve it!"

To that he made no answer. Perhaps, she did not, but it made no difference.

"Then you still love me in spite of all my wickedness?—for that is what it amounts to. I am bad—*bad*, in the eyes of the world, and yet you love me?"

"Love like mine cannot alter. I loved you from a wee kiddie, and somehow, nothing you do can make any difference."

Nadia regarded him with soft eyes of wondering adoration.

"Oh, Bruno!—God loves like that, I should imagine. I don't know much about Him, but that's what good people say, and you have the same spirit! What would I do without you!"

Jasper smiled absently. His mind was too full of the grave problem he had to study, and leaving her in a measure comforted because she could lean on him,

he retired to sit alone with his pipe and think.

His responsibility towards her parents! . . .

It did not bear thinking of.

What was there to say in extenuation of what had happened? She was too young to have been put in the way of such a catastrophe. How was it that he and his mother had been so blindly trustful?

It wasn't possible to say that, like a coward—distrusting the human and weaker side of his manhood, loving this child-woman as he did, and she unwittingly tempting—he had kept out of her way, believing his mother capable of looking after their joint charge.

His mother! The most virtuous, pure-minded woman in the world, incapable of imputing evil to any but the most degraded of human beings.

He was utterly to blame. He should have known that women, tenderly reared, of good families and sound moral training, found their way as respondents into the divorce courts because of their inability to withstand the great temptation that comes in the guise of passion. On every side there was evidence of how resistance weakened when desire and conscience were in conflict.

Why, then, expect too much of a girl in the flush of adolescence, whose moral perspective was out of focus, whose sense of proportion was ill-balanced? The same applied to a boy in like case. It was for older minds and wiser heads to control the situation for such. And he who had been entrusted with the helm of a little barque in stormy waters, had slept and let it dash itself against the rocks!

Nadia must now be saved at all costs, and for the sake of her future and her parents' dignified position, he would have to see to it that no one was allowed to discover the truth. Were it known, her own mother would range herself on the side of Nadia's enemies, for Lady Donithorne was proud and ambitious, and would

not acknowledge a child who had brought disgrace upon her. Jasper could see the Pharisees of her set draw aloof, priding themselves that their sins (more heinous in the sight of God), were at least successfully hidden from the sight of men.

He had a talk with Nadia that night, after finding the only solution to the problem that was possible under existing circumstances. He had spent the day alone, isolated in a gondola while the boat cruised about the Lagoon, thinking deeply, with the result that he came to Nadia looking resolute and composed.

"You have not heard at all from Wylber?" he asked.

"Not a word—not a line!" Her humiliation was pathetic.

Jasper had expected as much. When Wylber went so eagerly to Canada, it had been easy to sum up the situation. The boy was self-convicted and aghast at what had happened. His father's death had brought him rudely to his senses, and he knew himself for a cowardly blackguard. The natural impulse was to get as far as possible away from the reminder of his crime against an innocent child—he himself being little more than a schoolboy. In Canada it was possible to make a new start with the past put behind him; and he was now busy finding distraction among new scenes and new faces. To have written to Nadia would only have been weakness (so he, probably, judged). Having no means to support a wife, he had not dared to suggest marriage to the girl he had wronged, so his best plan, he believed, was to forget her and his dishonour as speedily as he could.

Jasper tried to instil something of philosophy into Nadia's distracted mind, but was not confident of success.

He then told her of his idea. In order that no one should get to know of her trouble and expectations, he wanted to leave her in Paris with a lady who was

a loyal friend. She had been his own governess when he was a kid, and had married a Frenchman, Monsieur Dufour, who had a motor business. Whenever he stayed in Paris, he always went to the Dufours, who were overjoyed to receive him. He believed that Madame Dufour would be the best person to take care of her. She had had a son who had been killed in the war, a daughter who was married and living in the South of France.

"But what is she to think of me!" cried Nadia, in distress.

"I am coming to that. I have thought it all out, Nadikins, and I feel that your child must not be allowed to be born a bastard—for that is the word that will stick to it all its life. You will have to pass as—my wife. Do you mind? There is too much at stake if you refuse to accept the protection of my name."

Nadia was speechless for a few moments.

"Oh, Bruno—I *could* not refuse! But you?—what of you? Must I take such a great sacrifice from you and so injure my best friend in the world?" She had not half realized the nature of the injury, or all that the sacrifice would involve. She could only think of him tied by law to her who was unworthy to kiss his feet. How had she treated him? How repaid him, all along, for his unremitting affection and loyalty to her?

"That's all—you need not concern yourself with me. I am never going to marry, so I might as well make it seem that you are my wife. Mother must return to England, and I will take you to Madame Dufour after we are married before a registrar in Paris. Madame need not know your age—in any case we'll have to advance it, officially."

"Then—later on . . . ?"

"She will probably consent to take charge of the child which, for some reason we will state, must be

kept out of England. That will be for a later consideration. Madame Dufour never comes to England, as she has quite lost touch with old friends and has no near relatives in the old country. It is the best we can do, and Mother and your parents will understand that you are 'finishing' in Paris with my old governess, who is competent to arrange for your masters."

"Oh, Bruno! how wonderful you are! I shall never in my life be able to tell you how I feel towards you for your goodness towards me! I have no words to express my gratitude."

Again, Jasper would not let her speak of it. He had no need of gratitude or words to express it. He was selfish in doing what he could to save her, for he felt himself to blame. He owed it to her, though he did not require to tell her so. Therefore, the best he could do was to give her the protection of his name. That he was inwardly thrilled to feel that the legal ceremony would make her absolutely his own, was also something known only to his soul. She did not love him as he had begun to love her, merging the old feeling into the new; he could not expect it. But he knew he was becoming very dear to her; the rock against which she leaned, and no one else in all the world would be as near.

There was a great deal yet to be arranged and understood, so they talked it over quietly and earnestly for a while. The main thing was that no one should dream of her state. Her story was to be their secret; their marriage, when it took place, kept to themselves and only revealed when the necessity arose. He was thinking further than she—of the possibility of the child dying after birth as infants sometimes die, when it might be her wish to regain her freedom from him. In the years to come, her freedom might be the greatest need of her life, in which case, he would give it to her. If no one knew, no one would be a bit the wiser even concerning the release. Only they and certain legal

persons in Paris would know. He would never stand in Nadia's light.

That was Love, as Jasper knew it.

IV

Mrs. Noble did not see eye to eye with her son in the matter of Nadia's "finishing" in Paris. What was this new notion? Wasn't London good enough for her? She was surprised to think that Jasper was so ill-judged as to plan such an unnecessary step without taking the advice of her parents. He should not be too ready to take so much responsibility on his shoulders. The expense, too, would be considerable.

Madame Dufour? Oh, yes, she had nothing to say against the woman. She was conscientious and kind. But it was a wild-cat scheme. It might be the fashion to "finish" a girl abroad for the sake of languages and all that, but it could so easily be done later, in Nadia's case, as she was not yet sixteen!

Not yet sixteen!

"I will be sixteen very soon," put in Nadia.

"My dear Nadia, I am afraid you are becoming rather wilful, and Jasper, as your guardian, should be firmer. He gives in to all you want. I am sorry, but I cannot agree that it is wise to leave you in Paris, even with a motherly soul like Madame Dufour, for you are too young."

"A great many unwise things have already been done," said Jasper, as his only reproach for his mother's indiscretion with regard to the girl and boy companionship which was at the root of all the trouble.

"I am beginning to think so. This trip abroad, when you really cannot afford it! Though I have enjoyed it thoroughly, Jasper, I must say it is making me very anxious, for Hammond writes that you are

having a shocking harvest. I don't know how you are going to manage for money."

Nadia's face of distress to think that more money was being spent on her account than Jasper could afford, made him reply a bit sharply that it was entirely his affair, and that he knew what he was about.

As Nadia was not likely to be better for some time, and he was afraid that his mother would consider it necessary to take medical advice, Jasper hurried matters through as quickly as he could; wrote to Madame and received a satisfactory answer by telegram, after which the party prepared to leave Venice. Fortunately, Mrs. Noble was glad not to be called upon to break journey in Paris; and as long railway journeys always made her feel unwell, she declared her intention of staying a few days in Milan. She had long wished to see the famous picture of the Last Supper, and attend an opera at the Scala, so they would have to part company with her at the great junction. There was actually no need for her to be with them on Nadia's account, she remarked, as Madame Dufour would take the child over from Jasper the moment the two arrived at the terminus.

Jasper did not reply, for he did not mean to hand Nadia over until after the marriage at the registry office. There would have to be a delay of a few days on account of legal formalities, so he had already wired for rooms at the Grand Hotel. He congratulated himself on the fact that he knew no one from England visiting Paris at the moment, or it might have been a little awkward, afterwards.

CHAPTER VII

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

I

WHEN, one day not long after their arrival in Paris, Jasper took Nadia in a taxi piled with luggage to Madame Dufour's flat, she was wearing a wedding ring on her finger, and trying, in spite of her extreme youthfulness, to support her position of a married woman, with dignity.

All the way in the taxi, her wistful eyes gazing from the window kept filling with tears, and the tremulousness of her lips would not be controlled, for Jasper was leaving at once for London, and it would be months before she would see him again. In the first place, he would be too busy to leave the farm, and in the second, he had to confess that there was too little money to spare for any more needless journeys. He was to return to her when sent for by telegram, and not before.

In the meantime, she was pledged to be brave and work hard at her music and languages, so as to have occupation and no chance of brooding too much. But the burden of secrecy weighed heavily, and the thought of her false position, was more than she could bear.

To her mind, lies and deceit were more degrading than the degradation of being an unmarried mother, in her circumstances. The world, however, would pardon every sin but that of which she was guilty!

It was going to be unspeakably difficult to part from Jasper at a time when a girl was most in need of comfort, for he stood to her as a mother along with other relationships; the most unreal, being—*husband*. How was she to exist without him?

Naturally courageous and independent, she had now lost her nerve and trembled with apprehensions. So many things could happen to her. She did not mind dying if she could die suddenly and painlessly. In fact, she prayed every night to die, for the inexorableness of things frightened her. Nothing could avert the ordeal before her!

Oh, if Bruno could only have stayed!

She could not imagine opening her heart to a stranger like Madame Dufour, or seeking consolation from her. She, with the rest of the world, was to be deceived. Jasper, alone, understood her, and she kept nothing from him, mental or physical, for he was even dearer and more pitiful than her mother.

"I cannot bear to let you go," she said, with quivering lips, slipping her hand into his in the taxi, on their way to Madame Dufour's.

"And I hate to go," said he. "But it cannot be helped. I'll come the minute I am wanted, so you can keep a brave heart. It does not take very long for me to fly across, and I'll be with you—in time."

"Months and months—and months!"

"They pass very soon—soonest of all, if you work industriously. For the rest, I feel confident that Madame Dufour will be a kind friend."

"It terrifies me lest someone I know should call and ask to see me! People travel so much nowadays."

"I don't think you need fear that. People are generally too much wrapped up in themselves to think of calling on a girl in Paris when there is such a lot to do."

"Suppose, Madame should write to your mother—just in a friendly way to report how I am?"

"I will tell her to write only to me. She has not corresponded with my mother since she married, and is not likely to begin now."

"I shall write, as usual, to my mother and father—but—it will be so difficult!"

"I am so thankful your mother won't be coming home till year after next. That has been a great comfort."

"Doesn't it sound terrible, Bruno, that we should conspire to keep her in the dark?"

"Ghastly! But there is no help for it. Under the circumstances, she is happier deceived. The spirit of the deception is pure; the truth, in this case, would do the greater harm."

That was a little comforting.

They arrived at Madame Dufour's and were received very cordially, for Madame had always kept a soft corner in her heart for Jasper, and welcomed him with open arms, kissing him on both cheeks, French fashion.

"And this is the little wife! Oh, *mon Dieu!* but, you have robbed a nursery, Jasper! How wicked! Why, she might yet be in school, *non?*"

"I am older than I look," said Nadia, trying to smile as she shook hands. And Madame, being too well bred, did not ask her age.

The flat was home-like and comfortable, with a guest-room which was given to Nadia, and while she retired to arrange her things in the drawers, Jasper informed his old governess of her special need for care and consideration.

"You can be perfectly happy. I shall look after her, and Alphonse will treat her as his own child. Poor little one! Oh, but it is cruel! She is surely too young to be a mother!"

Jasper, feeling very much a culprit, when he was, in truth, Nadia's guardian angel, quickly changed the subject. He made it understood that his wife was to have no visitors for fear of undue excitement—in case

English people called, Madame was to say she was indisposed.

Madame was also to write her bulletins to him, only, and to no one else. He and his wife did not wish it known that she was *encient*. Time enough—later.

While he discussed business with her, Nadia stood at the casement and regarded the view—tall houses with serried rows of windows opposite, all belonging, undoubtedly, to flats; chimney-pots, and the quiet street below which was one of the minor arteries of that gay city.

At the far ends were larger thoroughfares where buses plied and traffic was more or less congested; and in the distance the tops of trees of the Champs Élysée.

What a confusion of sounds, through which the hooting of motors sounded in many keys, at times, making harmonious chords! Listening to their imperativeness, she could almost make them speak a language of their own.

When she said good-bye to Jasper that afternoon, Madame considerately left the room, and Nadia flung herself into her guardian's arms.

"How shall I do without you!" she sobbed.

It was good hearing, and he kissed her tenderly, his heart throbbing for love of her.

"Write to me," he managed to say, keeping his voice under control. "I shall think of you always and —work for you."

He would need to work hard for her, he was thinking, to find the money that would be needed in the spring!

"I never knew that anyone could be as wonderful as you," said she, pressing her cheek to his. Though her words were hopeful, her tone was as passionless as a child's, and Jasper sighed. He was, however, thrilling to the thought that she was now all his own, and that the future was not without possibilities of

happiness. One never knew! She had ceased to speak of Wylber.

Jasper drove away to the Gare du Nord, and Nadia stood looking down the cobbled street for the last glimpse of the taxi, telling herself that time would soon pass and bring him back again. It was difficult to realize that she was his wife—husbands and wives meant so much more to each other, whereas, she was still the little girl he had always petted and cared for, and whom now he was steering through rough seas, like a storm-tossed barque—that was all. Just guiding, with his hand on the helm till he could bring her into harbour and to safe anchorage.

II

As time passed, Nadia grew more used to her independence, and found that she could even be happy with Madame. Being married to Jasper had taken a load from her shoulders. He had now the right to defend her against the world, and he was very dear to her. Gradually, Wylber's personality withdrew into the shadows, and she began to feel more able to analyse the circumstances that had contributed to her fall. Still, she thrilled to the memory; still, she knew she loved him as she would never love again; but she was more resigned to her loss and able to excuse his silence. He had done her a great wrong, and since he could not repair it, he had no other alternative than to cut adrift that she might forget him. He did not know subsequent history . . . and even if told, he was not in a position to right her.

So Nadia settled down to her studies and lent herself to her new surroundings that she might speak French with ease and fluency by the time Jasper came again. Madame Dufour proved a kind-hearted woman, and her

husband had beautiful manners. He always kissed Nadia's hand when he came home in the evenings, and was as attentive to his wife as in the days of his courtship. If the exigencies of his business kept him away from home for a few days, he never failed to bring his wife a consolation present, which Nadia grew to recognize as a peace offering, for his wife was humanly disposed to be suspicious of those repeated absences. In France, women of the world have few illusions; but it is always difficult to scold or reproach one who has shown that he has had you in his thoughts to the extent of buying you a jewel such as delights the feminine heart. Madame had lived so long in Paris, that her psychology had become French. To listen to her talking to the shopkeepers at wayside stalls on market days, was Nadia's delight. It was amazing to speak two languages so well and be equally at home in both.

Sometimes, she accompanied Madame Dufour to the large shops in the vicinity of the Opera House, and made her selection, under advice, of the little garments she had to be provided with for the spring, and she conducted all her conversations in French, much to the satisfaction of Madame and the attendant.

"She will learn very soon," said the elegant shop-walker on one occasion. "Perhaps, she is the little daughter of Madame, *n'est ce pas?*"

"No, no, no!" But Madame was delighted at her mistake. "She is the little wife of my friend in England, and of a disposition sweet beyond praise." On one occasion, she whispered the news, so interesting to female minds, and which she found so difficult to keep to herself.

"Oh, la, la, la! *Pauvre petite!* But no! Herself, she is so young! *C'est impossible!* It is of a cruelty inconceivable. What monster of wickedness has taken one so youthful to wife, and sent this trouble upon her?" The Frenchwoman's eyes dwelt pitifully on

Nadia's immaturity, the slim, slender lines of her, and she shook her head. "*Mon Dieu!* but what does he deserve? La, la! May the Holy Virgin keep her well and give her a safe delivery."

Nadia's letters from her mother always left her greatly depressed, for they were so full of the pomp and formality of her status, socially and officially, in that distant colony. It seemed to her that her mother was more than ever the *grande dame*, and thoroughly aware of her own and her husband's importance. With a little imagination, Nadia could read between the lines and see how people kow-towed to the Governor, Sir Laurence Donithorne, and Lady Donithorne. The latter enjoyed her grand receptions and formal dinners, the "bunting" and the decorations when on tour, the outriders and state functions, and the privilege of ruling the young aides-de-camp, and her husband's Private Secretary, with a rod of iron. Oh, her mother was far too fond of the life to come home for some time yet! for which Nadia was intensely thankful.

She had letters, also, from England, apart from Jasper's. Petal wrote, having obtained her address from Jasper. It seemed that her mother had never recovered her health, and had, at last, been persuaded to see a specialist who was urging an operation.

> "I don't know what is wrong," said Petal's letter, "but Mother looks dreadful. She has become very thin and hysterical. I feel dreadfully frightened. I do wish she would get it over, as I have been nowhere for ages, for as you know, I never do go anywhere without her. It is getting on my nerves, for no girl gets so few outings. My governess says that it was time I was allowed to do a few theatres, but Mother is afraid that the plays are too grown-up for me. I went to see 'Peter Pan' and 'The Blue Bird' in December, and 'Charley's Aunt' in January, with my

governess, and they were simply too perfect! How I laughed at 'Charley's Aunt'! but when I got back, Mother was worse, so everything was spoilt. How are you? I hope well. Please write soon, you lucky girl, to be in Paris! Mother would not let me go to any of the theatres in Paris, nor to any of the cinemas. Other girls go everywhere, but me—— I will now end this letter as I have no more to say.

"Yours affectionately,
"PETAL.

"P.S.—By the way, do you know what a cancer is? That is what I heard the nurse tell my governess is the matter with my mother."

As Nadia knew very little of diseases, and had a faint inkling that Petal had named a fatal disease, she inquired of Madame, and was shocked and sorry for poor Mrs. Honeywell. She could well believe that it was terrible, in her case, to be facing death with the thought that she was leaving Petal defenceless and alone in the world. She had brought her up to be mindless and childish, a fit prey for the unscrupulous. Though herself so young, Nadia was aware that there were unscrupulous men and women in the world who traded on the young and innocent. What, now, was to become of Petal, who would be like a bird liberated from a cage, its wings clipped, and at the mercy of the hawks.

Jasper also wrote that he had heard of Mrs. Honeywell's illness, and was wondering what would become of Petal.

In a letter received from Petal in February, the news was quite definite.

"The doctors say that my mother is dying, and I feel so wretched, I cry all day. I have never

seen anyone die, and am scared out of my wits. Oh, Nadia! how shall I bear it? I can't imagine doing without her, and that's what is making her so miserable, for she can't bear to leave me. Just after I last wrote to you, I did an awful thing—at least, so the nurse said. I asked Mother what a cancer was when she was not supposed to know she had it. Of course, she got excited and wanted to be told how I got the idea. So I told her the truth, and that made her worse. Ever since that, she has been very bad. It must be dreadful to know that one is going to die! I simply can't bear to think that my mother will never get well, and that, henceforth, I shall have to depend on myself. I do wish you were in England so that I could see you sometimes."

Upon this came a letter from Mrs. Noble saying that Mrs. Honeywell was dead. The operation in the winter was not successful as the disease was too far gone. Petal was a pitiable object, totally without backbone or ability to stand alone. When one saw flappers working in offices in the city, and settling the matter of their own careers, one could not help deploring the folly that had made Mrs. Honeywell persist in rearing an "angel-child" in a world of devils. As far as her hopes were concerned, Petal was to be given pure and innocent to some man for a husband some day, when men were themselves the reverse of pure and innocent.

"I don't know why I am writing like this to you when you are such a child yourself, but you have been brought up by a broad-minded mother and are wise in your generation"—("Too wise," groaned Nadia.) "I am not in sympathy with such folly as Mrs. Honeywell's, and firmly believe in the happy medium. A moral sense and the fear of God should be a girl's shield, even if she does not

happen to be ignorant of life. Mrs. Honeywell and some old-fashioned people like the grandmothers of the present generation, confounded innocence with ignorance; while modern mothers, having no religion, teach none to their girls, who embark on life, when they leave the schoolroom, like rudderless boats.

"To return to Petal. It was a great consolation to her dying mother, when Mrs. Young, a distant connection of the Honeywells—our Mrs. Young—took Petal over. As Belle and Kate are married, she is all alone in the flat at Earl's Court, so is, naturally, very glad to have Petal. As her own daughters are extremely modern, smoking, riding astride, wearing very short skirts, and calling men by their Christian names, Mrs. Young is shocked out of her life, and has re-acted to Mrs. Honeywell's theories. She is delighted with Petal's innocence, and was, you may imagine, a great consolation to Petal's mother at the last.

"I hear from her that Wylber——"

Nadia's heart gave a bound and seemed to stand still at the sight of that name on paper, and she read the line again.

"I hear from her that Wylber is getting on splendidly with his uncle, who is delighted with the boy, and has offered to adopt him altogether. His own son was killed in action during the war, and he is only too glad to let Wylber fill his place. Mrs. Young says that her beloved boy writes quite cheerfully, and seems to have taken to the life. He seems to have no inclination to return to England, and would rather his mother visited Canada instead. Mrs. Young, however, dreads the sea, and has no intention of going over, as yet, but hopes that Wylber will be able to take a run to England, some time, when he is more established. Mr. Wylber-

force Young, the uncle, has been very liberal to Wylber, so that he is doing remarkably well for a boy of his age."

Mrs. Noble concluded in the hope that Nadia was getting on with her music and languages, and would do them credit by the time her mother returned.

A few more letters from Petal in the weeks that followed, showed that the girl, having little depth of character, had settled down contentedly, because no longer in doubt as to her own safety in a threatening world. Mrs. Young made an able successor to her mother; and Mrs. Young's daughters, who were infinitely amused at her (looking upon her as an anachronism), enjoyed misleading and mystifying her still more completely concerning life—in fact, as they confessed to their friends, " pulling her leg." To them and their circle, Petal was a freak-child, and treated as such; and Mrs. Noble, writing of her, said that with her long plait and short frocks, she might easily pass for thirteen.

Nadia's birthday was marked by a cheque from her father and a gift of jewels from her mother. Jasper wrote a longer letter than usual with an enclosed draft to buy herself what she most wanted, and Mrs. Noble remembered the occasion with a packet of handkerchiefs, apologizing for so meagre a present, as she was a poor woman and her annuity did not go very far. Moreover, Jasper had been obliged to reduce his allowance of late, as the farm was doing very badly, she regretted to say. Jasper did not confide in her, but she knew that he was greatly worried and had recently been obliged to sell some land and take out a further mortgage on the property. In fact, the property seemed now to be mortgaged to the hilt, which was occasioning them all a great deal of anxiety.

Nadia was distressed to hear of Jasper's difficulties, and deplored the sacrifice he must have made to send

her the draft, seeing that money was so scarce. Her letter in reply became one of his treasured possessions, for it revealed the depth of her gratitude and appreciation for all he had done and was doing for her. Needless to say, she did not cash the draft—which Jasper discovered later.

Madame Dufour took her as a great treat to the Folies Bergere, as the programme, advertised, was very special. Heavily cloaked and looking the worse for her uncomfortable condition, Nadia felt nervous and desperately embarrassed. She hated her looks and was glad that Jasper could not see her now. It was, however, a happy diversion, and the programme not a little startling to her English and youthful mind. During some of the scenes, she thought of Petal and the shock it would have been to her tender susceptibilities to see so much female nudity made artistic for the public entertainment.

" What sort of women are they who allow themselves to appear on the stage so unclothed? " she asked Madame, when the beauty chorus of the revue appeared in gorgeous head-dresses and chiffon or satin draperies trailing from the hips.

" I have no doubt that many are quite moral and respectable in their lives," said Madame, in her French accent, acquired by long residence among French people. " Isn't it a lovely scene? " as more young girls of classic perfection descended from above in floral swings like statues of alabaster against a background of dissolving lights upon shifting clouds.

" Is it possible to be moral and live decent lives without a shred of modesty? " asked Nadia, her cheeks burning.

" It is all a point of view, I suppose," said Madame. " If from early childhood you were brought up to perform nude, or almost nude, to hundreds in a theatre, the fact of being without clothes would mean nothing to you. These girls are trained to the stage from infancy

—most of them—and can be pure without the need to cover their nakedness. You blush for them when they see no occasion to blush for themselves, but to be proud of their perfection. Life to them is the worship of Art. Art of the studios, Art of the stage. Their outlook is not yours, their lives run on different lines."

"I suppose they marry?"

"Undoubtedly, they are so beautiful—or they are the mistresses of men to whom they are faithful. Those men will be in the auditorium waiting, as also, in some cases, mothers are waiting, to take them safely home. It is all, as I said, the way you are brought up to view things."

"I could not see a sight like this being allowed in London!"

"No. In London, it would not be Art. It would be obscenity."

Which made Nadia puzzle exceedingly. What a difference was made by the "point of view"!

III

Jasper grew very restless towards the end of April, his mind in Paris, his body at Basingbrook Farm. Things had gone very badly at the farm, owing to disastrous seasons and neglect on the part of Douglas Hammond while the party were travelling on the Continent. Disease had broken out among the cattle, and the loss had been heavy—too heavy to recover. It seemed that the end was inevitable. The property which had been Jasper's for generations, had suddenly received a blight which was steadily working its ruin. He should never have taken his hand off the helm and gone abroad at the most critical time. But—and he felt very helpless as he looked back on the misfortune that had caused him to leave England—it had been the only

chance of taking Nadia out of herself and giving her other things to think about than her passion for Wylber. He saw that the time for her character and mental development was also critical, and the need to widen her horizon and show her the gravity of her error, imperative. If he had made a mistake, he was now having to pay for it, and more heavily than he could bear. Facing him was dire poverty, for the farm was mortgaged to the extent of its full value, and there was no money to meet the expenses that loomed ahead.

Whatever happened, he would have to be in Paris early in May. Before, if the telegram called him.

Poor little Nadia!

In keeping her secret, he knew that he was acting for her best good, for the world was like a wild beast, ready to spring on her and tear her limb from limb. What hope would there be for her in the future if all were known? Even married to himself, she would not escape scandal, or he, censure!

What manner of man would he be considered? It would be said of him, that he, her trusted guardian, had demoralized and led her astray; after which he had felt compelled to right the wrong by a hurried marriage in France!

Life was full of queer ironies! That he, whose religion it was to protect youth and innocence, should be accused of leading his precious Nadia astray! Yet, better that, than the truth which would bring on her, unjustly, the verdict of "natural depravity."

Jasper felt that he had done rightly to deceive the world by hiding his beloved girl in Paris where it could appear that she was finishing her education.

Fate, however, often takes a mischievous delight in shattering human plans and projects.

Jasper received, late one evening in spring when a hurricane was blowing and rain descending in torrents, a telegram that he took for what he had been expecting.

He was, however, startled to find that it was from Lady Donithorne:

"ARRIVED MARSEILLES COMING VIA PARIS WILL BRING NADIA HOME."

To say that Jasper was paralysed with shock, would be saying little. To him, it seemed nothing less significant than the end of the world. What ill-fortune had brought Nadia's mother home? Such a calamity had been farthest from his imagination.

What was to be done?

Nothing he could do now could save the situation. By the time he could arrive in Paris, Lady Donithorne would have been with Nadia for a day.

The effect of that visit—the shock in her delicate condition—would be dangerous to Nadia.

Yet, he must go at once. Whatever happened, he would be required on the spot to support the unhappy child against the wrath of her own mother. He hoped and prayed that Nadia would not name Wylber. It was bad enough as it was, without giving away the ghastly truth to Lady Donithorne. Let her blame himself—he could bear it, but not the shame she would heap on Nadia for going wrong, deliberately, with a boy.

All at once, Jasper was galvanized into action. His mother was told that bad news was taking him immediately to Paris. . . .

Was Nadia ill?

He had reasons to believe that she was very ill. Anyhow, as the weather was too bad for flying, he would take the first boat in the morning. It was a case of "Damn the consequences!"

IV

Lady Donithorne still took much pleasure in giving and receiving pleasant surprises. Believing that her visit to Nadia, while proceeding to London, was likely to be both welcome and delightful, she refrained from apprising Madame Dufour, beforehand, of her coming. It was half the fun to walk in unexpectedly. She even pictured the meeting all the way in the train as it rushed headlong to Paris. She would arrive in a taxi after making herself comfortable in some hotel—it did not matter which—and be carried up in the lift to Madame's flat. There was usually a lift. She would knock, and Madame would see her in the drawing-room, to which the maid-of-all-work would direct her. Oh!—the excitement. "Nadia!—Nadia! guess who's here? Guess, child! You never would believe it!"

And Nadia would come rushing in, all sparkles and joy, and just *fall* into her mother's arms.

It was a strange fact that Lady Donithorne had not realized her maternal instinct until parted from her child, when she discovered that she loved her little piquante daughter, exceedingly, and was proud of her cleverness and charm. She had always been a charming child, and so curious concerning life! Dear me! Lady Donithorne recalled how difficult she had found it to deal with that curiosity, and how happily Doctor Mary Payne had come to the rescue! Since then, abroad, in the East, she had discussed the matter of growing children with other mothers, and found that they were all coming to an agreement on the subject of being frank with their sons and daughters at the age of adolescence. The idea was to kill curiosity and be done with it.

Poor Grace Honeywell went to the other extreme! She did not believe that anyone could kill curiosity, and was more afraid of a child knowing too much than too little. It was a debatable question, and no doubt

depended largely on individual disposition and character.

However, she was glad that Nadia was no anxiety to her, thanks to dear Jasper and his mother. She remembered hearing what a nice woman Madame Dufour was, and how much the Nobles had depended on her.

On arrival in Paris, Lady Donithorne drove to the Bristol, and after securing her room and seeing her luggage deposited in it, she hired another taxi and gave the driver Madame's address.

In due course, she arrived, with many pleasurable palpitations in anticipation of the meeting. She was not, however, prepared for Madame to receive her at the door with a face of anxiety and distress, and be ushered into the sitting-room unceremoniously, on the way to which she was called upon to listen to a torrent of unintelligible statements.

"How fortunate that you have come!—it is the hand of God!" Madame was saying, breathlessly. "Oh, my dear lady, the responsibility is killing me. The dear child has just been conveyed by ambulance to the nursing-home, as the doctor I called in, thinks very badly of her case——"

"Good God! is my child ill?"

"Oh, Madame—very ill indeed! I have sent a telegram to her husband in England——"

"Surely you are making a mistake! My daughter Nadia is not married! She is but a child."

"*Mon Dieu!*" gasped Madame, relapsing into French. What was this mystery? "You are the mother, and do not know?"

"Please explain. I am utterly at sea," cried the bewildered mother.

"Your daughter, Nadia, has been expecting a child, and was this morning taken ill. I sent for my doctor, who seemed to think that he should have been sent for long ago, for there is reason to think the child cannot be born. If he had known of it earlier, he would have

made arrangements—we would have known what to expect. An operation might have saved it. But, now, in her agony!—it is certain that the child cannot be born alive. Things have gone too far. The poor darling wanted to get it over before her husband could spend the money, which cannot be spared, to come over, so told no one of her pains till she could no longer hide them, and then the mischief was done. If she lives, it will be a miracle of Almighty God. Oh, Madame! To think they never told you! I don't understand it at all! Married secretly—and now this!"

"I cannot follow you, Madame Dufour. I understood my daughter was in your care while continuing her studies. There was no word of her having married anyone. Who has she married, all unknown to her parents, and she too young to decide on so important a step?"

Madame looked scared and shocked.

"I thought you knew!" she let fall.

"Who is the man, I ask? And does her guardian know?"

"Her guardian? . . . Oh, Mother of Jesus! This is terrible! Her husband *is her guardian*—our dear Jasper, whom I have known since a child, and a better man does not exist on——"

"Madame!" Mrs. Donithorne reeled under the blow. "How have I been so wickedly deceived? Do you know that the child has only just turned sixteen? And married!—for months!—and now about to have a baby. I cannot take it in. My Nadia, and Jasper whom I trusted and believed in as God's Good Man—I would have trusted him to the death!"

"In the meantime, Madame, your child is among strangers and in a dying state. Won't you be merciful?"

"I am going at once to her, but this matter will need looking into. Where is the nursing home?"

Madame offered to accompany Lady Donithorne,

and not long afterwards the two ladies were driving to the maternity home to which Nadia had been conveyed, Lady Donithorne listening in haughty displeasure to the circumstances of Nadia's arrival at the flat. Madame was loud in praises of the girl. Never had she known such tractibility and such sweetness. And how she doted on Jasper, the little one! and for him, she was everything in life. "Spare nothing that means her happiness and comfort," he had said before leaving in the autumn, and only because money was so scarce, just now, he would have made many journeys to and fro. "You are disappointed, Lady Donithorne," she cried, reproachfully. "But let me say, nowhere could you find a husband so good and true."

"Madame Dufour! My child is a minor. Her guardian knew it, and dared to use his position of influence to marry her secretly, then hide the truth from us. And why? Because he knew we would never have permitted it. Apart from the fact that I had higher ambitions for my child, she is too young—far too young for *this!*"

"Oh, my God, yes! She was too young for motherhood, though one does hear of mothers as young, in other countries."

"Her father will never get over this. I shall never forgive it."

"Oh, don't speak so harshly of one at death's door! Let it not be forgotten that you are her mother."

Nothing more was said as they had arrived and were being ushered into the waiting-room of the Home, a simply furnished apartment with a table and seats round the walls. The atmosphere of the entire building reeked of disinfectants, and no one spoke above a whisper.

When the sister, accompanied by a doctor, was heard descending the stairs, it was Madame Dufour, not Nadia's mother, who ran out to hear the latest news of the girl. Shortly afterwards, she came back and volunteered the news that Nadia was under the influence

of an anæsthetic, and that the doctors were going to deliver her without further delay. The child would have to be sacrificed.

Lady Donithorne listened unmoved, for she was furious. The more she thought of it, the worse it appeared. That Jasper, whom they had trusted and loved—oh, it was unspeakable! Nadia was but a child, and she had always said she would marry him when she grew up. She would naturally do what he told her! She was angry with Nadia, but the child would probably die, which made her feeling against the man she considered responsible, all the more bitter.

For one in her position and of her ambitions, to feel shamed and humiliated, to have this scandal thrust upon her!—it was unspeakable. People would believe anything, and gossip would make her life not worth living. She could guess the sort of thing that would be said—Nadia in England while her parents were in India, had been betrayed and ruined by the man they had trusted; a man who had made belated amends by marrying her. How could she pretend to people they were wrong?

Yet, what more likely? Why that unseemly haste to marry one so very young, if not forced to do so by circumstances?

Lady Donithorne could hardly wait to hear that she would not be allowed to see her daughter immediately, but took the fact for granted and hurried back to the flat with Madame Dufour to find and read the marriage certificate which she hoped to find among Nadia's letters.

This she had no difficulty in locating, and by the date, saw that her worst fears were well founded. Jasper had proved a traitor to friendship, the base betrayer of youth, the cause of her child's utter demoralization. Lady Donithorne's state of mind beggars description. She writhed in her anger and despair. She could have slain this once trusty friend who had wrecked all her hopes in her only child; she almost

wished at the moment that Nadia would die, that everything might be hushed up. She could always make up a story. But living, Nadia would have to acknowledge this unseemly marriage to a penniless man whose position in life was of no great importance, and who had barely enough money of his own to keep the two! And the disgrace, if the story of the confinement leaked out! Her daughter could have married into the peerage! . . . It was all too terrible.

Lady Donithorne considered the possibilities of an annulment. Nadia was a minor and this could be effected; but what man would care to take a girl who had previously had an escapade of this sort?

Jasper had been guilty of a criminal breach of trust! There was no punishment bad enough for him.

By the time Jasper arrived the next day, Nadia had come through her confinement safely and was lying in a critical state, too weak to see or notice anyone. The child was "sacrificed," as Lady Donithorne was told, and the best professional skill was engaged in battling for the young mother's life.

"Oh, Madame," said Madame Dufour, "sink your anger and resentfulness in pity for the little daughter lying at death's door. She is yours, and a sweeter girl I have not known. If she deceived you, don't owe it against her now."

"Madame," said Lady Donithorne, "you have little idea what this means to me. I shall never get over it, nor forgive the man who has ruined my daughter's life."

The man arrived, white and shaken, for they told him at the door the latest news. He was the husband and had a right to know; even the right to creep up to Nadia's room and stand silently looking down on the ashen face of the girl he loved, afraid to breathe lest he should see her die.

With face working in silent grief, he faced Nadia's mother alone in the waiting-room, which, at the moment, was vacant and at their service.

"Did you see her before she was taken ill?" he asked Lady Donithorne, so sternly, that she was amazed. She could hardly recognize in the accusing, square-jawed, ruggedly-featured face, the Jasper Noble she had known.

"I have not seen nor spoken to her yet," she replied, with blazing eyes. "So this is your work! Coward! Seducer! Traitor!"

Each epithet was used as the lash of a whip, but Jasper did not flinch. This added fuel to the fire of her wrath, and she made no attempt to curb her fury, challenging him to defend his action; but still he continued calm, waiting for her to cease.

When she had exhausted her eloquence in denunciation of his dastardly conduct, he answered her with no sign of humility or remorse in his tones.

"I was afraid that you had excited her and hurried matters. Nadia may be your daughter, but she is my wife, and I forbid you to approach her while unable to control yourself. She must not be made to feel unhappy, or be reproached. You are at liberty to say what you please to me. I will admit that you have a right to be angry at the failure of all your hopes and plans, but it is too late to mend matters, so there is nothing to be gained by vituperation."

"Oh, you can stand there and say that to me!" cried Lady Donithorne, in a rage. "If her father were here, you would have him to deal with, not a woman who can do nothing—who is impotent to punish you. You have robbed us of our daughter like a low thief! Your hypocrisy makes you the most contemptible of men, and unfit to breathe the same air with honest folk. What do you mean to do if Nadia recovers?"

"We can discuss that later, and in more fitting surroundings."

"I look at you and wonder at the change. You are not the man we knew, whom we trusted, whom we believed an honourable gentleman! What made you do

this evil thing? I have seen the marriage certificate, so now you know what I mean!" Her flashing eyes fixed him with devastating scorn, and Jasper's fell, unable to bear it any more.

"I cannot discuss this with you, Lady Donithorne. If you will excuse me, I have other matters to attend to." He swung on his heel and left the room.

CHAPTER VIII

COUNTING THE COST

I

SINCE Nadia's child was, mercifully, not living, Lady Donithorne was forced to reconsider the case and think of some way out of the difficult position in which she found herself placed. It was inconceivable that her daughter's good name should be dragged in the mud of scandal, and her parents, who stood so high in the world's esteem, have to suffer shame and humiliation on her account.

The best thing to do, thought she, in calmer blood, was to hush it all up. Now that there was no living evidence of the marriage made in such unseemly haste, there was no reason why it should not be annulled. Nadia being under age, and the marriage having been contracted without her parents' consent, there would be no difficulty at all, and, moreover, by some arrangement, no notice need appear in any newspaper. No one who knew the Nobles or the Donithornes had any knowledge of the circumstances, save Madame Dufour, who could be bound down to secrecy, and thus, the situation be saved. Lady Donithorne saw no need to mention anything to her husband with reference to the subject. She argued that he would be greatly upset and rendered unfit for his official duties; Nadia being the apple of his eye, the shock would unsettle him completely. No! If, by any chance, Jasper and Nadia

would consent to an annulment and put no difficulties in the way, she was willing to forgive the unfortunate business and wipe it out altogether as far as her child was concerned. From what she had heard, Jasper's finances were in a bad way, and he bordering on ruin. It was, therefore, impossible for him to support a wife or insist upon taking Nadia from them, and so make a ghastly scandal of the whole affair.

She waited for Nadia to be well before insisting upon seeing her, as the interview was bound to be an agitating one, and she would have to be strong enough to stand it. In the meantime, Lady Donithorne remained aloof, in dignified exclusiveness, informing herself through the telephone of her daughter's progress towards recovery.

Madame Dufour was shocked and disgusted, sentiments which were shared by the French nurses who had one and all capitulated to Nadia's charm. "The *pauvre petite!* so brave, so sweet! who would not love her! The good God was merciful to bring her through so severe a trial. But for her husband, she might still have been enjoying an innocent childhood! The selfishness of man was inconceivable! Yet, one could not be too hard on this one, for through him, undoubtedly, her life had been saved!"

This was in reference to the time when Nadia had been sinking and a transfusion of blood had turned the scale in favour of her living. Jasper had eagerly offered his, and from that moment the patient had made progress, owing her improvement to him.

Jasper, who had always loved her, felt that she was now doubly his, purchased by his blood—for all time, part of himself. In the purest sense, she was his—the most precious being in the world.

He would sit in the shadow of the room and watch her asleep, pouring out his prayers for her recovery, and filled with all of a mother's protecting, selfish devotion, as well as the passion of a man for his mate.

He would speak with her when she was permitted to converse, and in his eyes was the look of a dog-like fidelity. Whatever might be the world's opinion of her act, to him she was one of God's saints, with a soul as white as driven snow. Truth, and sincerity, and honour were hers, and her fall from her pedestal of virtue had left her unscathed. If unhindered, she would confess the whole truth and nothing but the truth to her mother —a thing he was determined to prevent her doing at all costs. He had quixotically taken the blame on his own shoulders, and it was the least of the sacrifices he was prepared to make for her.

When he carried her to a lounge by the window on a golden summer afternoon, he knew that he loved her as a man loves once only in a lifetime, and he thrilled to the contact of her light form against his breast.

One day, he broke the news to her that her mother was in Paris. Very cautiously he went about it, and finally the fact was laid bare.

"Then—she knows?"

"Yes. I have told her—all."

"Oh, Bruno!" she clasped her hands over her heart and looked piteously frightened. "What did she say?"

"We had a row, of course," he replied, not meeting her eyes. "She was furious at having been kept in the dark—mad with me for marrying you——"

"But surely she sees that it was a wonderful thing that you should want to do it after——"

"If the child had lived, she might have been glad. But now—you see, Nadikins, I'm a pauper. I shall soon be looking for a job—the farm has got to go! So she cannot be proud of me, and would rather all this was hushed up and wiped clean off the slate."

"Oh, Bruno!" Nadia caught his hand and pressed it against her white cheek. "Mother was always worldly—but how she must despise me!"

" She knows you were very young. She holds me to blame—and not unjustly. Nothing would have happened if I had never relaxed my care of you. Poor little Bunny-rabbit! "

" And now you have no money—why, Bruno? Have you been spending too much on me? " Her eyes were lustrous with anxiety and distress.

" There have been too many bad seasons and a run of ill-luck while we were away. I have sacked Hammond, for he has been neglecting his duties," he prevaricated. " I wanted to tell you that your mother will be seeing you soon, and if she is at all disagreeable, don't fret, for she is not likely to scold you. Whatever happens, I want you to promise *not to mention Wylber's name*— to say nothing about him *whatsoever*. Will you promise? "

" Yes, if you wish it. I am glad to do all you tell me," said she. " When shall I see Mother? " alarm shadowing her eyes. A certain redness of the rims made him question her. She had been crying. What was the trouble now? And Nadia confessed. He would think her weak and foolish, but she had not been able to help it. She had been thinking of her baby!

" I would like to have had it to love, Bruno! " The tears rolled down her cheeks, and her lips trembled pitifully.

" That is natural, honey," said he, with a sympathetic lump in his throat. He then consoled her with argument. Various points of view were presented to point out that everything happened for the best. If baby had lived, it would have been an everlasting reminder of the boy she had to teach herself to forget.

" What is going to happen when I am well and able to leave this place? " she asked.

It was the problem that was exercising his mind, and could only be settled after a second conversation

with her mother, which she would have to conduct in a less aggressive mood, or it would be difficult to arrive at an agreement. Jasper knew that after he had paid all the expenses of Nadia's illness, he would, indeed, be a pauper, and obliged to work, immediately, for his daily bread. He could not provide for Nadia, much as he wished to do so, as the doctors were unanimous in forbidding her return to the treacherous climate of England for at least a year. The South of France, with the mild, warm breezes of the Mediterranean, was prescribed as most likely to build her up again and give her good health.

Since it was as impossible for Jasper to find the money as it was to wring blood out of stone, he knew he would have to make a desperate appeal to Lady Donithorne on Nadia's behalf. But until he knew the outcome of that interview, he could make no definite plans. All he told her was, that she must trust him to do what was best, and turn her attention to getting well quickly. To see her so frail and white, so weak and prostrated, was more than he could bear.

When he left her, it was to call on her mother, for time was precious, and he had none to waste. He had been too long away from the business of preparing to sell the estate, and every mail showed him the necessity to return without further delay.

He meant to tell Lady Donithorne of the need to sink her personal feelings in order to nurse her child back to life and health, or she would sink into a decline and die. When the will to recover was absent, the task was a difficult one, and required devotion and sympathy. He did not know that the matter had already been considered, and an ultimatum decided upon that would dispense with his offer to take Nadia away the moment he was in a position to do so, later.

Lady Donithorne received Jasper in her private

sitting-room, and she might have been a duchess in her dignity and disdain. Her eyes regarded him with scathing contempt, though she refrained from heaping upon him the insults of the previous meeting, for having already expressed herself on the point, she had only her terms of surrender to offer.

"The marriage will have to be annulled. I am ready to go about it immediately. This you cannot but agree to, now that you are absolutely unable to provide for a wife. There is little use for Nadia to object. It can only make trouble," Lady Donithorne said, gravely.

"Need you go as far as that? It might not be long before I am in a position——"

"After the way you have betrayed our trust, nothing in the world would make me consent to Nadia continuing as your wife. She is under age, and I demand the annulment, particularly as she is still dependent upon her parents. Her father shall know nothing of all this. It would break his heart as it has broken mine. I cannot refuse to succour my own child, but I will do so, only on my own conditions. I demand that you leave the country. Find work in the colonies—in fact, I think it will be your only chance. There is India—Australia—Africa open to you, and, with influence, I have no doubt you will find your feet, but Nadia must be free. She is too young to be bound to a man in your position, and one who has shown himself capable of the greatest dishonour. However, enough has been said on that score. You know my feelings on the subject, so I do not require to repeat myself. The farther you are away from all likelihood of meeting any of us, the happier for us all. Nadia is but a child, and I think I can be trusted to give her a chance to make a fresh beginning. No one knows. No one shall know of her mistake. We will call it that, though the world would not judge her as leniently. What have you to say? Is there any way by which

you can do better for her in her delicate state of health than we, her parents, can? "

"I can do nothing for her advantage, materially. In her interests I am obliged to waive all claims," said Jasper, quivering from head to foot. "But I reserve the right to correspond with her. Nadia will be none the worse for my letters, and hers will mean everything to me. Surely you cannot object to our writing to each other? "

"I most emphatically do. It must be a clean severance, or I cannot be responsible for my daughter's future. Enough has happened through her association with you, to make me feel that you can be nothing but an evil influence in her life. Now that I am about to put back the hands of the clock, as it were, and begin afresh, any connection with her past will be a serious stumbling-block. You can see that, in all justice to Nadia's parents? "

Jasper, who had smiled involuntarily at the words "evil influence," could not help viewing the situation from Lady Donithorne's angle and admitting that, from her point of view, she had justice on her side. How was it possible for her to judge the situation correctly, when she had been so thoroughly deceived?

But not to write or hear from Nadia! He was bewildered to think of the emptiness of his life. Nadia, and all that pertained to her, had become a habit with him. And she? . . .

Lady Donithorne continued speaking, and the sense of her argument was fair enough:

"If, after she has turned eighteen, it is proved that Nadia's happiness depends on you, why then. I myself shall send for you, provided, by that time, you are able to support a wife in comfortable circumstances, and give her to you decently. You will be married in the sight of all the world. Till then, it isn't too much for me to ask that you leave my daughter alone and let me, her proper guardian, influence her for her good."

"Do you think you understand your child?"

Jasper spoke in great bitterness of spirit. Not only had he deliberately robbed himself of an old friend's respect and trust, but was a loser in every other respect. He was now losing his precious Nadia—perhaps for ever!

"I don't think I do," said Lady Donithorne. "I never thought that a child of mine would have been so lacking in the moral sense, as to have brought herself so low—and at so tender an age! Whatever blame there is, however, is yours." She regarded him with devastating contempt, then relaxed her attitude and sighed. "You married her. In that you showed that you were not completely a blackguard, and now must make the only atonement possible. When she is free, there must be no sort of communication between you. When you leave Paris, I require the separation to be complete."

"You give me no option," said Jasper. If he had only a little money and a home to offer Nadia, he would have defied this proud autocrat to her face. As things were——!

"Then we are agreed," said Lady Donithorne, rising. "You will meet me at my lawyers to-morrow at the hour I shall appoint by telephone, and no time need be lost. From what I understand, you cannot afford to spend any more money idling in Paris, and are needed to attend to your own affairs. In justice to myself, I would like to tell you that I have written to your mother who, I imagine, is ignorant of all this, and who is the only other person entitled to know what Nadia's parents owe to Jasper Noble, the man they honoured and trusted above all others. For her son's sake, she is not likely to give the shameful story away. She will know what to say to her son who did not respect the virtue of a little girl scarcely upon the threshold of womanhood! I wish you good morning, Mr. Noble."

II

A few days later, when Lady Donithorne had accomplished her desire, Jasper hurried back to England, but not before bidding his beloved girl a long good-bye. It seared his heart to feel that she no longer bore his name, even though she had borne it secretly. Their lives, henceforth, would run on different lines that diverged. He was wise enough to feel that, in youth, impressions are not lasting. Few girls of sixteen did not change their outlook on life as they developed with the years. Would she have the same sweet frankness when they met again—if ever? Would she love him with the same intimate simplicity and say there was no one in the world like "Bruno"? Or would the years cause poignant memories to fade?—the memory of all he had been to her, done for her, and saved her from, when she was like a piece of thistle-down at the mercy of wild winds?

He had not only rescued her, but brought her safely to the home nest again, and was now, for her sake, effacing himself. Could any man have done more for the girl he worshipped?

Jasper never asked himself if Nadia, the child-woman, was worth the great sacrifices he had made for her. Such an idea never occurred to him, as love like his counts no costs nor sets any values.

Now, all would depend on the mother's handling of the keen, intelligent nature, whether the aspirations awakened in her towards goodness would be encouraged and fostered, or diverted towards worldliness and personal advantage?

Most of all, Jasper found himself praying that his Nadikins should never meet Wylber again. Whatever

had actuated the boy in preserving an unbroken silence and however he might comfort himself on the completeness of his cure, it was certain that his feeling for Nadia would return in a flood the moment he set eyes on her again or came under the influence of her extraordinary charm. What then? If still single, he would undoubtedly wish to marry her. If married——

Jasper felt distinctly uneasy. How could he guarantee that Nadia would have the strength to resist him? The two, caught in a maelstrom of intoxicating memories, given the opportunity, would consider no human soul that stood in the way.

Not even himself; for his influence in the coming years will have been removed, and what he might have worked for and kept alive in her, been allowed to wither and decay.

May God help and save her! he prayed.

When he bade her good-bye, he had need of all his self-control, for Nadia wept inconsolably on his breast. Alone together in her bedroom, to which he had access as her "husband," the nurses being considerate towards one who made no secret of his devotion, they were able to speak openly without the fear of interruption.

"What am I to *do?*" she cried, hopelessly. "Oh, what am I to do?"

"You will be brave, honey, and get strong, remembering that it is my hope and prayer. Don't forget me. Rather, encourage the thought that I am with you in spirit, watching over you and shielding you from harm. I love you so! I love you so!" It was the first time he had allowed a man's passions, a man's desire, to creep into his voice, and Nadia grew silent and trembled.

Jasper loved her—not as a big brother—a guardian—a parent.

It required thinking about. All at once, she felt dismayed, clinging closer, for was he not the dearest

being in the world now that Wylber had gone out of her life. With this new knowledge piercing her consciousness, resting in Jasper's arms had a new significance, and till very lately, she had been his—*wife*. Only in name, but still—his wife!

"You have always loved me, Bruno?—foolish, wicked ME!"

"Always—always, and now more than ever. Now that I am going away and shall not see you nor hear from you direct, for—oh, so long! it will feel a lifetime."

"'Now more than ever,'" she repeated in wonderment. "Not like the little child, any more?" she persisted, pressing her cheek to his throbbing heart.

"No, honey. The little child suddenly became a woman under my eyes, so it was natural that my love should also spring into the giant it now is. Will you love me a little bit when I am gone?"

"I can't imagine you gone!" the tears raining down. "If you could only stay, I shall love you—and love—as you deserve. I want so to be loved in the 'giant' way. Bruno!—why must you go?"

"They have parted us, Nadikins. And because I have no money and must work—work like blazes to make money, I have had to resign—my little wife—my honey-girl! But," he raised her face and kissed her lips with sudden passion, "I am coming back for you one day—one day! Will you think of that day and keep me in your heart?" His whole being was thrilling to her confessed desire for love such as he had to give her—and she such a little girl still! What had life done for her? What would it do with her, when he was out of sight—out of mind? He trembled for his chances in the future with this passionate feminine nature thrown back on itself, in unsympathetic hands, and wholly misunderstood.

"They say, 'Everything happens for the best'—do

you really believe it? " she asked, growing thoughtful, her eyes downcast, lashes shadowing her cheeks. Jasper saw a glimpse of her sweet face in its fragile purity, reflected in the mirror across the room, her profile outlined against his breast, her arms twined about his neck, and he carried the picture away with him to feast on in the days and months to come.

" It often happens that way, but it isn't very comforting to me, in the present," said he, burying his eyes in her mop of red-brown hair.

" All I can see in it is, that I shall have to learn to stand on my own feet and not lean on anyone any more, as I have leant on you. But I want to thank you, Bruno," she cried brokenly, " only I have no words. You have been like God to me! If one has never known anything about God, it isn't difficult to imagine Him after knowing you."

" Oh, Nadia!—don't. Please don't! " he cried, humbled and protesting. It was blasphemy, when he knew all his own shortcomings and weaknesses, his strivings and failures!

" I will always feel that it is possible to be good—really, and honestly good," she continued, " for I have known you. Not good in the self-righteous, pharisaical way of professed Christians—the sort that think you are damned if you don't believe in the Old Testament and never go to church. But the sort that lives right and thinks right. Of course, I could never be all that. I am made differently, and get caught by any old gust of wind that blows hard enough to lift me off my feet, and now without you—my sheet anchor—God knows what will become of me! "

Jasper held her close and kissed her soft hair again and again.

What would become of her?—he was afraid, because he knew her impulsive and passionate nature—the temptations that would surround her in the years to

come—the adventurous spirit of her that brooked no restraint and was courageous enough to act contrary to Life's laws and conventions.

"Oh, it hurts to hear you say that," he told her. "I want some better promise to hold on to in the days to come."

"I have been nothing but a curse to you, Bruno! How you came to love me, is a miracle! You have spent money on me when you had little enough—I see it all!—and only now I realize it all. How can I ever make it up to you? You are ruined, you say—beggared—and, perhaps, through me! Yet I can do nothing! If I had money, Bruno, I would give it all to you!"

It sounded very sweet, though childish, and Jasper laughed chokily, the tears rushing to his eyes. He had no answer but to draw her again close and kiss her good-bye. Time was speeding, and trains and boats waited for no man.

"Listen, Nadia," said he, in husky earnest. "Neither of us can look into the future, but I want your promise to call me back to you should there ever come a time when you want me in the same way that I want you. Understand? Just say, 'I will call you, Bruno.' And if I am at the other end of the earth, I shall come. You will then be older, and if I am worth anything, I shall be successful—or, dead. Say it!"

Nadia promised, and then released him, for he had to go.

III

When Jasper had gone a day, Lady Donithorne felt sufficiently self-controlled to pay her daughter the visit she had deferred so long. By this time, it was a well-known fact at the Home that there had been parental

disapproval in the matter of the marriage—but in the case of the English, it did not interfere with the legality of a marriage with a minor. That was a matter for mutual arrangement. The nurses eyed the lady coldly in spite of the awe her fine-lady appearance inspired, and she was shown to Nadia's room by the skivvy who was brushing the stairs. No one desired to honour her at the Home, for she was an unnatural parent, and as such had earned the contempt of all whose profession it was to serve women in their hour of travail.

Lady Donithorne, though regarded as a hard woman, looked down at Nadia among her pillows on the lounge, with tears in her eyes, for she remembered the child she had left behind her in England, not so long ago, and knew that she had very nearly been rendered childless. Many terrible things had happened since she last saw the slight form, and looked into the starry eyes, none of which bore thinking of, much less talking about, so she had resolved not to permit any reference to the past. "Least said, soonest mended," and she stooped and kissed Nadia on the brow as a token that she had not come as her enemy.

Nadia, believing that her mother knew "all," was deeply touched.

"Oh, Mother!" she cried, gratefully. "I never thought you would care to kiss me again!"

"Hush!" said Lady Donithorne. "I am trying to forget all that. Since we are to live together, the past year is best cut right out of remembrance. I want to feel that I have my little girl back again. Is it too much to ask of you?—silence on the subject of things best forgotten?"

"I shall be glad to forget!" sighed Nadia. How wonderful it was that her mother should take this attitude, she thought. How magnanimous! She did not think her capable of such breadth of mind. She raised her mother's hand to her lips and kissed it

fervently. It was so unexpected, that she felt already better and happier.

Lady Donithorne, then, took a chair and talked about her voyage home. She had had malaria once or twice, so that it was decided that the climate was bad for her and that she was better at home. Very disappointing, she said, for she loved the life and was distressed to leave Nadia's father. It was a great pity that Nadia must live abroad for a while, but if the doctors said she must, there was nothing to do, but obey. She was therefore writing to friends at Nice to secure rooms in some charming pension from which they could look about them. She thought of renting a villa for a year. It would be more comfortable in the long run.

"I suppose you speak French quite well, by now?"

"Pretty well," said her daughter.

"Why haven't you removed that ring?" she asked, catching sight of the plain gold band on Nadia's finger. "You have no right to it any more."

"I will remove it when I leave the Home. No one here knows anything, so I will keep it a while longer, if you please."

Lady Donithorne disliked opposition, and it seemed that if she waived her authority in the beginning, her child would ride over her head.

"No, that is not my idea. Anything that is going to keep you thinking of—that man, I will not tolerate. I have had enough of Jasper Noble. Give it to me."

Nadia's hand lingered over the offending ring, showing her great reluctance to part with it.

"Oh, how can you speak so of Jasper! He has been so wonderful to me," said she, tearfully. "In spirit, I am kneeling at his feet. I could not begin to say——"

"That will do. Give me the ring, Nadia. You

should know better than to hesitate when I have already had so much to bear from you."

That was very true, and Nadia removed the ring at once and made it over to her mother. At least, she owed her parent obedience, and now gratitude, as never before.

"Thank you," said Lady Donithorne, slipping the ring into her handbag, pleased at her first victory. She believed that there would be a few tussles of will to come before Nadia learned that she was in a position of dependence, and, while under her mother's protection and a minor, obliged to defer to her in all things. She liked independence, and had trained Nadia to think for herself; but a line had to be drawn somewhere, and it was time to draw it now.

She thought Nadia exceedingly grown up in her manner and her grasp of things—too old for her age; and that she would be all the better for some more college life. There were good finishing schools on the Continent, and she could be warned to keep her sophistication to herself, so that schoolgirls might not be the worse for associating with her.

During Nadia's convalescence at the Home, Lady Donithorne kept her conversation to impersonal topics —Paris and its shops, tourists and amusements. The ways of taxi-drivers, too. The way hers brought her to the Home, was enough to give a delicate person heart failure. Taxi-drivers in Paris drove miraculously. They turned corners on two wheels, they pulled up in their length, they broke all the laws of the road with impunity, and met with fewer accidents than taxis in other cities, as large and congested.

It was Lady Donithorne's wish to see Nadia more herself and more of a child; so she planned to give her youthful society and wholesome distraction. When she was fit to leave the Home, she took her, immediately, to the South of France, and looked up those among the English residents who were known to her, so that there

would be no time for brooding or looking back. Nadia was to eliminate a year out of her life, and be fifteen again, in mind, if not in years.

Nadia, however, had a just appreciation of Omar Khayyám's philosophy concerning the "Moving Finger," which, having "writ, moves on"; for not all her prayers nor tears could wipe out what had been written on the tablets of her soul.

IV

When Jasper reached home, it was to place the farm in the hands of agents for immediate sale by auction, and to begin to search for a job. Since it was only out of England that he could hope to succeed rapidly, he used all the influence he could command through friends and acquaintances to enter a business house in one of the colonies, and was not without hope.

In the meantime, it was heartbreaking to uproot himself from the home of his ancestors, and little comfort to know that he had no sympathy from his mother, who believed that he was entirely to blame for his ruin and loss. If it was not entirely due to his folly over Nadia, it was his neglect in leaving such a man as Hammond to play ducks and drakes with the management of the farm; and as the latter was going to Australia to a property he had recently purchased for sheep-farming, it was evident to the weakest intellect that he had "made hay" for himself during Jasper's absence abroad, while the sun had shone.

The direct effect of Lady Donithorne's letter to Mrs. Noble was her refusal to meet her son, though she knew that he was, in all probability, leaving England shortly for an indefinite period. Her cold reply to his letter

offering to call and see her on a certain day, made it clear that she had no day to spare for her son, and Jasper was deeply hurt, for his mother had never before turned her back on him whatever his mistakes and wrongdoing in the past.

However, in spite of the snub, he called in the hope of winning her to a kinder mood, for he could not believe that she would persist in refusing to see him. Nevertheless, it was impossible to undeceive her as to the actual story, for she would immediately write and tell Lady Donithorne the truth in vindication of her son.

No! His mother was not to be trusted with the knowledge of her son's innocence.

However bad he was expecting his reception to be, he had never dreamt that it would be quite so bad. Mrs. Noble entered the room looking years older. All her little vanities of dress had been laid aside; she had lost interest in life, utterly and completely.

At sight of her son, she burst into tears, and when Jasper attempted to take her in his arms and comfort her, she waved him aside; she had no wish that he should even touch her.

"That I should have lived to see this day!" she cried, helplessly. "To be able to say, 'Thank God his father is dead and not here to witness the depravity of his own son in whom he had such faith!'"

"Oh, Mother!" came despairingly from Jasper. "Have faith in me, too!"

"Faith in you—the betrayer of innocence? Better a millstone were hung round your neck and you drowned in the sea. That is what I am thinking! I could have excused this, even forgiven you, if you had been young—a lad in the melting-pot of adolescence, so to speak, unbalanced and with passions not properly under control. But—oh, my God! Oh, Jasper! Go!—leave me. I have received my deathblow. This is something from which I shall never recover."

Jasper came and knelt at her feet, full of love and

tenderness for his mother. He would have given his life to spare her such anguish—but he loved Nadia, and he could not spare his mother's feelings at the expense of his beloved's happiness. If Lady Donithorne had been any other sort of woman—if he had only had the money to take Nadia away—then, and only then, could he have confided the truth to his mother. But as long as the girl was depending on her mother's tolerance and forgiveness for her well-being and happiness, he would never expose her to that mother's fierce condemnation. With her spirit, Nadia would not bear it, and would run away—God! Jasper did not dare to think what would happen next.

Kneeling at his mother's feet, he pleaded for her pity.

"Mother dear, I have been through a terrible time. Can't you feel for me even a little? I am not as bad as you think——"

"Then it is she who is bad!—rotten to the core. She tempted you——"

"Never!—never! Don't say that!" he cried, sternly. "You shall not blame her wrongfully. I wish to God I could tell you all."

"There is nothing to tell. Your marrying her tells me all I care to know. You would not have married that child secretly if you were not responsible for her state. Go, Jasper, and spare me this harassing interview. I wish never to see your face again."

"You mean that, Mother?" he cried, his hands gripping hers.

"I mean it, most unhappily! I am ashamed that you are my son!"

"You, who have known me all my life, can think this terrible thing of me?"

"I have no chance to think anything else. Do you deny it? Will you say that you do not love her, even now, as a man loves, not as the guardian and protector her people thought you."

" I cannot deny that I love her, my happiness is bound up in her. Had I the means, she would be with me now. That marriage would never have been annulled. Then loving her so, how could you think that I would dream of wronging her? "

" What do you want me to think," she cried, exasperated, as though she thought Jasper was treating her as a child. " Isn't it all plain? Could you expect anyone to be so simple as to exonerate you when her child, born six months after you married her, speaks for the state of the case."

Jasper saw himself from her view-point and his heart sank. He was sorely tempted! If only she had the wit herself to recall Nadia's intimacy with Wylber, he might have bound her down to say nothing to Lady Donithorne —it would not have felt the same as his giving Nadia away! However, it was just as well, for his mother's pride would have made her refuse to be bound. She would have insisted on righting him in Lady Donithorne's eyes.

Mrs. Noble, it seemed, had no thought of Wylber in mind. He had gone to Canada immediately following his father's death, and the memory of those days in August when he had companioned Nadia, were effaced. Besides, she had always believed him upright and honourable, and not a whisper of gossip had tarnished his good name.

" I may take you at your word, Mother, and leave the country, for I am looking for a job. The farm is up for sale. Is it your wish that we should part like this? " said he.

Mrs. Noble broke down and sobbed. Her son was her son, and she could not pretend that she had ceased to love him, whatever his sin.

" Oh, Jasper! better if you went away! at least, it will give me a chance to forget this dreadful thing."

" But—you will forgive me for not telling you we

were married? You will think kindly of me when I am gone?"

"It will be very hard. My thoughts of you will be filled with reproach and bitterness. How can it be otherwise?"

"But—I am your son! You will love me and write to me when I am far away. Think!—Nadia and I are parted. I love her—I love her! My heart is wrung with sadness, for we are pledged not even to write to each other. The marriage is annulled, and without news—it will be like death never to have a word—a line! Pity me, Mother dear, and write to me. I shall depend so frightfully on you—and all you can tell me of my little girl."

"Jasper, oh, Jasper! I cannot forgive what you have done. I cannot feel the same toward you. You have fallen so low in my estimation—you are no longer like the son I knew!—but, I am your mother—there is no denying that, and—and—I suppose I shall write to you. I shall have to write to you."

Jasper bent and kissed her hand gratefully.

"I couldn't do without your letters, dear. They will be the only link."

He left her after that, feeling that he must be content with her promise to write.

Not many weeks later, he sailed for East Africa, having obtained an appointment in a commercial centre as a foreign correspondent and secretary to a firm of export and import merchants, and his mother, still unrelenting towards him, grudgingly promised to write to him regularly by the mails.

"My mother-heart makes it impossible to be indifferent to all that may concern my son," she said, on bidding him good-bye, "so I shall always write; but, frankly, you have dealt me a blow from which I can never recover. The world will never be the same to me again. Never shall I be able to hold up my head in pride, feeling that my son is an upright and honour-

able gentleman, and, as I believed, an example to all men. I thought God had blessed me above women—till——" Her voice failed, and she said no more.

Jasper kissed her, the tears raining down his cheeks, and left her abruptly. He could bear no more.

BOOK TWO

LIFE'S PHILOSOPHY

"Then to the rolling Heav'n itself I cried,
Asking, 'What Lamp had Destiny to guide
Her little Children stumbling in the Dark?'
And, 'A blind Understanding!' Heav'n replied."

—Omar Khayyám.

CHAPTER IX

SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

I

MRS. FREEMAN, formerly Isabelle Young of the Vicarage at Basingbrook, was At Home to her friends at afternoon tea on the first Thursdays in every month. The custom of reserving a day for friends to foregather and be sociable, was more in vogue before the war than after, but Belle approved of it as she thought it a useful way of restricting the energies of the gadabouts of her acquaintance as far as she was concerned, to one day in thirty, rather than having to submit to visitations when unprepared to sacrifice her leisure and engagements. As she belonged to golf and tennis clubs, and enjoyed motoring in fine weather, she had a good excuse for her visiting-cards notifying, in the top left-hand corner, the fact of her adherence to her mother's pre-war practice.

Her home was in a residential part of Ealing, and not unlike a hundred others, typically suburban, described as "double-fronted villas," where a tiled pathway led from the green gate to the green front door, bordered on either hand with standard roses that were bare stalks with skeleton twigs, for five months in the year. Laurel bushes decorated the curve of the two bays, and a privet hedge marked the extent of

private ownership, separating the property from two other villas of the same pattern on either hand.

Belle and her husband, who was a "Physician and Surgeon," as the brass plate indicated at the gate, led a happy-go-lucky existence together, each having separate and individual interests, and neither interfering with the programme of the other. There was Dr. Freeman's consulting-room, Mrs. Freeman's drawing room, their mutual dining-room, and a cubby hole for his secretary, upstairs. As the secretary was an anæmic person who wore spectacles and was flat-chested and pious, Belle had no anxieties with respect to her association with her husband. Belle herself was Junoesque in build, and like all well-made, plump women, had biassed views regarding standards of physical perfection. She drove a runabout of her own so as not to be dependent on the doctor's car, and was a breezy and independent personality, somewhat masculine in manner, who professed a decided disinclination to be burdened with the cares of a family, children being an expensive luxury.

Whenever the front door was opened by a smart maid to the knock of a caller, there was a shrill chorus of protesting barks from Belle's pair of Pekinese pets, which rendered conversation impossible till they were persuaded that the intentions of the visitors were amiable, when they would retire, insolently tolerant, to the best seats, from which their mistress had not the heart to expel them.

"Poor darlings," she was heard to say on one occasion, "they have just as much right to be considered as we. More faithful than our friends, and being our most intimate companions, we should give them of our best in sheer gratitude for their devotion." They were introduced to new acquaintances as Totum and Tomtom, and good policy obliged a visitor to treat the privileged creatures with due respect.

One Thursday afternoon, in early summer, Mrs.

Freeman had a crush at afternoon tea, the same impulse having actuated each of her callers who were feminine, and all agog to verify certain news that had filtered their way.

They trooped in, balanced their teacups perilously, talked of topical matters, and discussed the latest scandal while waiting for someone to lead the way.

At last: "I hear that your brother in Canada is coming over shortly?" said the sporting Miss Gunthorpe. This brother of Mrs. Freeman had been a source of interest and curiosity to her set for months, photographs of him in various poses being scattered in frames all over the room, for he was an ornamental person whom no woman could fail to admire.

"Oh, is that so?" said a young married woman notorious for her masculine friendships. She had also heard the news, but preferred not to appear too eager. "He has a perfectly divine face. I should imagine he is a breaker of hearts over there."

"He is terribly good-looking," said a girl, picking up a photograph and gazing with adoration on the attractive young face. "I feel perfectly weak whenever I look at him. I know I'll fall in love, so you had better keep him out of sight when he comes."

"He *is* a beautiful thing," said Belle, handing cigarettes round, "but I'm afraid nobody's got an 'earthly,' as far as he's concerned. I have just heard by the mail that he's married. Quick work, I call it. Fell in love with the girl Mother took over, and as his position is assured, Uncle thought it the best thing that could happen if he was obliged to settle down. Uncle thinks the world of Petal Honeywell—such a babe, she is, too!—so they were married a week ago, after being engaged for a month, I am told."

Dear me! There were signs of disappointment all round. Just when expectations were at their highest, to hear that this young Apollo had gone and got married, was depressing, indeed.

"Then will he be coming over?" someone asked.

"They are all three coming over on a six-months' holiday. Mother is delighted, for she is homesick, and Petal still clings ridiculously to her. If you only knew the child, for though she is eighteen—nearer nineteen—she's nothing better than an infant, you would wonder how she had the courage to marry! It was terribly funny, the way she was brought up and all that!—told nothing, and left to look such a fool. But the men were tickled to death with her. That always got me. To my mind, it is such rank folly. Uncle thinks Petal's innocence the most refreshing thing in this sordid world. It depends how it's going to work in a wife! Wylber will have his time cut out enlightening her as to the things 'wives ought to know'!"

A gust of laughter followed the remark, and Belle was inundated with questions.

"She's exceedingly pretty in a doll-like way, but, oh! she always bored Kate and me stiff. I can't imagine Wylber, for he used to be keen, when a kid of eighteen, on a girl who was Petal's opposite, red-haired, vivacious, quick as a squirrel. Nadia Donithorne. In fact, it was quite a boy-and-girl affair, calf love, and the rest of it, but it died a natural death after he left for Canada. Do you know Nadia Donithorne?" she asked the company generally. As no one knew her personally, though most had heard of her in one way and another, Belle proceeded to inform her friends, in her gossipy way, of facts concerning Nadia, puffing at her cigarette and leaving them to serve themselves. "Nadia is wonderful. Her latest portrait in the *Sphere*, as a *débutante*, was the most arresting thing I have seen. She has remarkable eyes."

"I saw that portrait, by a Bond Street photographer—very fine indeed," said one of the girls. "She's a beauty, and no doubt about it."

"That's what I say, yet, she is not strictly beautiful. It's her eyes and expression. Of course,

she's run after a lot, and has more chances of marrying than any girl I have met. Since her father was raised to the peerage—you might have seen it in the list of newly-created peers—her mother has become unapproachable. Such terrific swank! Lord Donithorne, I believe, is charming and so natural. Nadia takes after him, and radiates charm. I met her at Harrod's not long ago, and though we were very casual acquaintances, she couldn't have been more charming. I told her that her old pal Wylber was coming over with Mother and Petal. I wonder if Petal writes to her? They used to be great friends, and it will be interesting to know what Nadia thinks of Wylber's marrying the girl. I had no chance to mention it."

"Nadia Donithorne will probably marry a duke or someone equally important," said Miss Gunthorp. "One generally outgrows one's early love."

"Her mother will see to that," said Belle. "Who's for more tea? Don't all speak at once!"

"Tell us something more about this Nadia Donithorne," said one. "I hear she is quite an heiress. Is that true?"

"I believe she inherited a fortune from an aunt in Scotland."

"Do let's hear all about Nadia Donithorne," a lady insisted. "She used to have a guardian, I remember. I recall him, a couple of years ago—or was it three?—rather an ugly fellow, as thin as a lath—put me in mind of a Roman Catholic priest."

"He's a dear! I don't know what's become of him, and can't find out. His mother lives in a boarding-house somewhere—a drab old lady—the kind that hugs the fireside in the general sitting-room, and knits yarn stockings for Barnardo's Homes. I haven't seen her for ages, as I lost her address. Jasper Noble went to Africa over two years ago, after the farm was sold. I was rather surprised to find that Nadia had quite lost touch with him. She adored him once, so I

naturally expressed my astonishment, but got nowhere. She changed the subject and, being rushed, apologized very sweetly, saying she could not stay talking, and fled. I was frightfully in love with her clothes. She dresses delightfully, and is very attractive."

"What did she say to the news that her boy-pal was coming over?"

"Now I come to think of it, she said nothing at all, but talked of something else. It is not unnatural for her to have lost interest in Wylber since he went away. He is such a man now. Mother says, though he is only twenty-one, he looks, at least, twenty-five."

"Where are the Donithornes living?" Belle was asked.

"Nadia said that they had bought a place in the Midlands, but were living on the river at Auburndale —it's near Staines. Her father wanted to be in town, and she wanted the river, so they compromised by renting this lovely spot. She was describing the house, with terraces and a lawn going down to the water's edge. They have a tennis-court and a boat-house, with several kinds of craft and a motor-launch. Nadia has river parties, and knows all about the motor, as well as punting and sculling or paddling, she says. In fact, as far as I could see, she has the most wonderful time of any girl in town. They go everywhere, of course —men take her to Ranelagh and Hurlingham, and it seems Nadia is always with a man. There was one with her at Harrod's whom she introduced, but who looked impatiently at me as if he owed me a grudge for keeping Nadia talking. But I had to ask a million questions, I was so interested, as I knew her in the old days at Basingbrook. Being Wylber's bright particular star, she used to have tea with us, and we with Mrs. Noble, at the farm."

"She's a jolly lucky girl."

Nothing more was said about Nadia, for the conversation returned to the marriage of Wylber to Petal

Honeywell, and Belle amused the company with stories of the girl's *faux pas* in presence of men; the queer, nervous modesty that earned her the name of Prude.

It was Belle's opinion that Petal was bound to bore any man who had to live with her, because she had no idea of how to please men. Having no understanding of men, she had nothing in common with them, how, then, could she make a success of married life?

"She's very pretty, you say, so that will go a long way," said a lady, blowing a cloud of cigarette smoke into the air.

"I doubt it. One can get tired of a pretty face if there's nothing behind it. I only hope Wylber has done well for himself. She has a little money. Not too much, but it will help, and Wylber will get all Uncle has to leave."

"If she is in love with him, she'll make him happy, for that's about all that matters, really. Intellectually, he'll find satisfaction with his men friends."

It was very disheartening to Belle's guests to know that the splendid hero of many of those Thursday afternoons was now the property of another woman and for ever lost to competition. They bade Belle good evening on the threshold of the drawing-room, their ardour considerably damped, and the neglected Pekinese pets expressed their relief by a succession of ear-splitting yelps of sheer delight.

II

If the news of Wylber's intended visit to England had any effect on Nadia, no one was a bit the wiser, though it added a new brilliancy to her expressive dark eyes and a sparkle to her conversation,

It was only when the mail brought her a thick letter in Petal's handwriting, one morning, at the breakfast table, and she glanced at the contents before settling down to read it, that she nearly gave herself away to her parents.

Her impulse was to leave the room with the letter so that she might lose no time in mastering its contents. But her mother handed her the coffee, and her father wanted the butter, so that her training saved the situation. No amount of self-discipline, however, could prevent the colour ebbing from her cheeks, or restore her vanished appetite.

"What's the matter?" said her mother. "Bad news?"

"Nothing at all," said Nadia, with a reassuring smile called up for purposes of camouflage. "It's too long to read just now, so I'll tackle it later. Is the coffee all right?"

"Nothing's wrong with it. Daddy would say so at once, if there was."

"The coffee?" Lord Donithorne asked, distracted from his plate of ham and eggs. "The coffee couldn't be better."

"Oh, then it's my appetite. Too many late nights. If you don't mind, I'll go to my room."

"What's wrong, Nadia? Are you ill?" her mother asked, anxiously.

"Not, really—only just feeling queer. Please excuse me," saying which, she gathered up her belongings and left the room.

"She is looking very colourless," said her father. "I hope she is not ill."

"Nadia never has much colour except when she puts it on," said Lady Donithorne. "It's as she says, too much dissipation. Nadia cannot rest. Ever since we came home she has done nothing but racket. Abroad, she was not strong enough, and the people we knew were so boring. But now!—I don't know what

she is doing to herself with all this gadding about early and late."

"Why do you allow it?"

"Allow it? Nadia tires me. She has too strong a will, and I am not equal to eternal contests with her. She will have her own way, and to get mine, it has to be a fight. That is, she thinks me arbitrary, and in the end, makes me think so too."

"Well then, perhaps you are. But on the score of her health, she should listen to reason. Not too long ago, she had to live abroad. We don't want her to break down again."

"Certainly not," said his wife, colouring in memory of that breakdown. It set her thinking and wondering if she were wise in allowing Nadia all that latitude to make her own engagements and go everywhere unchaperoned. It was modern and usual, for the days of chaperons were gone, but Nadia had proved that she had a kink somewhere that made her view life from an unconventional angle. Her experience at sixteen was something to make any mother anxious.

Nadia had many admirers of the opposite sex, and could choose a husband when she pleased. Of late, one there was who was beginning to show his interest openly, and Lady Donithorne's maternal heart swelled at the thought of the honour it would be to her little Nadia to become the wife of such a man.

Did the girl realize her good fortune to have attracted one who was the personal friend of Royalty?

It made Nadia's mother giddy to think of the proud day it would be for her, if this gentleman led her daughter to the altar and made her his wife. He was a great deal older than she, but what did that matter?

Her conscience pricked her uncomfortably when she thought of that buried episode in Nadia's past. It was unknown to the world and would never rise up and confront her. Mercifully, Jasper's lines were cast in Africa and they were not likely to meet again. He had

nothing to bring him back—unless it was to see his mother—while Nadia had not mentioned his name since they left the nursing home in Paris.

No one would ever hear it in connection with Nadia's, so no man need ever be told. By this time, she was sure her child had come to her senses, and was herself ashamed to recall that unhappy time. Ashamed, because of the reason for that hasty marriage to the man who had failed in his trust.

Lady Donithorne sighed, thankful that the nightmare had passed, and that she and Nadia had been able to bury even the memory of it out of sight for ever.

"I shall try to prevail on Nadia to spend a few quiet nights at home. This rush after pleasure can be overdone. She has quite enough of out-door amusements, and the river to provide her with entertainment," she remarked, as she rose from the breakfast table to write her letters and organize the work of her various charitable committees.

III

In the meantime, Nadia sat crouched in a window seat in her bedroom, devouring Petal's letter, her face looking frozen in its pain.

She had not heard from Petal for months before leaving Nice, nor had she been able to learn any news of her. She seemed suddenly to have dropped out of existence and Mrs. Young with her. The flat they had occupied was vacant when Nadia inquired, and the caretaker below could give her no news.

Now, all at once, was this letter dealing her a crushing blow!

Belle had mentioned that her brother was coming over—she had said no word of the others. Perhaps she

had not been given the chance, for the mention of Wylber's name had hurt so badly, that Nadia remembered changing the conversation immediately.

It now appeared that Petal had been with his mother in Canada for months, and that the inevitable had happened. She returned to the part that explained, and read it again:

"His mother wished it, and his uncle also, so how could I hold out against all three? Wylber was so determined, I can tell you that I have been scared to death, and, between us, I hate being married. It is to my mind so beastly. Isn't it funny that whenever I have the need to confide in anyone, I fly to you? But I am afraid you are angry with me for not writing for so long. Please do forgive me, but travelling does make it difficult, for there are so many new places and things that keep one diverted.

"Wylber's uncle is an old dear. I love him, and he lets me sit on his knee and imagine that he is my poor Daddy who died when I was little. Wylber gets quite jealous!—just imagine being jealous of an old man with a grey beard! But Wylber annoys me, all he wants is to make love, and when we are alone, he gets insupportable. Not that I am not fond of him, but I draw the line at *his* idea of love-making. I know, the first night I was married, I thought him horrid, and I cried like rain the next day when I ran away to his mother. She, however, made me go back, for—this is a secret only for your ear!—she told me that I would have a baby to love and cuddle like my dolls, so I made up my mind to endure married life till that happened. I suppose all women have had to go through with it if they want babies. You see, I did not understand. I do now; and what a fool I must have appeared before! The things I remember saying

in compar[illegible]! But, Nadia, marriage is very much overdone in books—all that stuff about passionate love I have been reading lately in novels. Unless you want a baby, don't marry. It's hateful. In the first place, why bring one up to be modest and all that, if for the sake of a husband we have to forget it all? That is the inconsistent part of it. I wonder what Mother would say, or if it is only Wylber who is so troublesome? I'll tell you particulars when we meet next month. I suppose I'll get your address from Belle. I am trusting this to her to be redirected.

"I was surprised to hear from Wylber's mother that he used to know you at Basingbrook. Of course, I was annoyed at his not telling me, but he said that he thought I knew. Funny, how it was never mentioned! Did it strike you that he has a vile temper? I have had a taste of it, I can assure you, for he flies into rages and sulks by the hour, and we've only been married a fortnight! If he does that now, I tell him that we'll be cat-and-dog in a year, and it's all because I won't be mauled about, and I won't have him coming into the room when I am dressing without first knocking.

"I am quite willing to do my duty as his wife, but surely he should respect my feelings? I wonder if you understand? But not being a wife, perhaps you don't, so we'll talk about it when I come. It is so hard not to have anyone one can open one's mind to. I wouldn't dare to his mother, for she would not understand. It is she who told me I must be 'dutiful.' But I do think men are horrid. Wylber told me in one of his tempers that girls like me put a 'premium on unfaithfulness.' What does he mean by that, do you suppose? I asked him to explain, but he would not. Perhaps he meant he'd love someone else—but I don't believe it, for there are such a lot of ugly girls here.

" Another thing is, Wylber and I find it so hard to talk, consequently, it's dreadfully dull when we are alone. He hasn't a single idea in common with mine. The other day he read me a lot of poetry he loves—Shelley, I think, but am not sure—and all the time I tried not to be bored, but I fell asleep in the middle of a thing about rivers clasping each other and clouds kissing the earth and nothing ever being single and all that sort of rot. Of course, he was annoyed. I did not mean to fall asleep, but it happened, because I don't care for poetry, as half the time it sounds rubbish. Oh, well, he never reads poetry to me any more, for which I am thankful. I can assure you, were it not for the hope of having a baby to kiss and fondle, dress up and show off, I'd just as soon not be married, for it doesn't mean only having a man along to take care of one on a journey and be the head of the house.

" In a novel I read lately, the heroine makes such a lot of fuss about feeling thrills and her heart stopping beating because her lover kissed her. In another book, a girl swooned with ' emotion ' when her bridegroom closed the door of the bridal chamber and took her into his arms. If it had said, ' swooned with fright,' I could have understood that. Aren't books nonsense? as if real life is ever all that! "

Nadia flung the letter from her and dropped her face upon her arms. Petal was a priceless fool. She had no patience with her.

Her mind had no room for thoughts of Petal, for the picture conjured up of Wylber—Wylber as a lover—made her feel faint with emotion. So he was still thinking of the girl in the wood at Basingbrook, or he would never have read those wonderful lines to Petal. He had read them to his first love in the shadows of the maples and oaks, his voice throbbing with feeling, and

Nadia remembered in a rush how the caress in his voice had been the narcotic that had intoxicated her brain —not with sleep, but with sheer passion. If he remembered so much, he would not be able to help contrasting the love he then knew and the love he was now given.

Nadia thought her heart must surely stop beating for the agony of jealousy she endured.

Wylber was hers—hers! What right had Petal to take him from her? She hated Petal—the pink-and-white doll that had a sawdust heart and an empty brain!

"Oh, Wylber, Wylber! why have you done this? Why not have returned to me!" she wailed. "I am yours. I could never belong to anyone else—I have been growing up for you! I thought that Fate had released me from my beloved Jasper that I might yet become yours! And now Petal stands between!"

Nadia rocked in her suffering.

"Petal shall not stand between. He was mine before he was hers," she moaned. "Petal shall not be allowed to stand between. We'll see—oh, come! and we'll see!"

Nadia paced the room unconscious of her movements. To and fro; to and fro she went, telling herself that Wylber was coming to London—she would see Wylber again.

How was he going to meet her eyes, knowing that he had married Petal?

She caught sight of her face in the glass, white, with eyes like sloes, lustrous in suffering. She was plain—plain! What chance had she beside Petal's flower-like beauty? Men notoriously preferred beauty to brains. Wylber was still boy enough to be lured by pink-and-white prettiness.

It was to be proved if the attraction she seemed to possess for most men, would be of no account with Wylber, who had lovely Petal for his wife!

"He *must* love me!" she cried to herself, her hand

to her throat, " because I love him and bore him a child! What will he say when he knows? " Or must he never know? In loyalty to her friendship for Petal —the silly little fool!—must she never tell him?

Nadia broke down and wept. Strangling sobs tore her breast. Why had she been unable to forget? Oh, why was it so impossible to forget?

Jasper. . . .

The name stole into her mind though she was not thinking of him.

" Oh, Bruno!—your Nadikins is no good at all! She has a bad heart. All your sweet patience and care have failed, and she is bad—bad! " she cried to space. Jasper, somewhere in Africa, was probably thinking of her, or how had his name come to mind, when for days and weeks at a time the memory of him was like a faded perfume?

She was bad, for no power of will could hold back the rush of memories or keep her from living over again those pulsing moments in the wood, and in the summer-house that fateful night, held close in her lover's arms.

She was bad, because unrepentant and eager to call him back to her, even though he was now the husband of another!

Determined to fight the demon of disloyalty and sin, Nadia threw open a drawer in which a treasured photograph of Jasper lay, and removing it from its wrapper, stood it in its silver frame on her dressing-table, from where it could look back at her, full in the eyes, telling her wordlessly to " play the game."

Wylber had wanted to forget her! Why should *she* think of him now?

Wylber was deliberately faithless to her—he was not worthy of a thought. There were other men, all anxious to woo her. She might be married to . . .

Nevertheless, to no man could she be a wife but Wylber, she told herself despairingly. She had loved him first, and loved him best.

What was she to do? How distract her mind? How live through the days till she should see him again? Lifting Jasper's photograph, she looked long and affectionately at it. She was going to disappoint the Spirit of Jasper which he said would always be with her. She was going to backslide, and the worst of it was, that not even an angel from heaven could prevent it, for this love was a species of madness, and it was all coming back!

She wondered was their any hope of regeneration for her?

Nadia dressed hurriedly and ran downstairs. In self-preservation, she must find something to do—oh, what?

At the foot of the stairs, she met the housemaid, her eyes red with weeping, her apron raised to her trembling lips.

Fanny was a very pretty girl whom Nadia thought would make a perfect screen heroine. She had often wondered why someone never suggested the idea to her instead of housework and domestic drudgery, for of all professions, that of a maid in domestic service seemed the most monotonous. It was those " evenings off " that saved their lives—or ruined them.

" What's wrong, Fanny? " she asked, as the girl hung her head and dashed past her up the stairs.

Something was evidently very wrong indeed. Seeing Lady Donithorne through an open doorway, Nadia paused to ask what was wrong with Fanny. " She looks as if she has been crying. I never saw such a miserable face! "

" She might well be miserable," said Nadia's mother. " The disgraceful little beast. Truly, I don't know what has become of the morals of the nation."

" Oh, but she is such a nice, pleasant-tempered girl —and very young. What's she been doing? "

" Doing? I can't imagine how we never guessed the truth the last few weeks." Lady Donithorne looked like a dignified thundercloud, her thin lips pressed

relentlessly together. " I have just given her her discharge, for I couldn't dream of having her about the place any longer, bringing a bad name to the house. I told her that we have no use for her kind, in service. There are rescue homes enough in the country."

" Oh, Mother ! " said Nadia, dropping into a chair overwhelmed. She had noticed that Fanny's figure had grown curiously broad and ungraceful, but had ascribed it to carelessness and plumpness. There were some girls who were obliged to wear corsets, while others were beautifully independent of them. But how appalling for Fanny ! " What is she going to do ? "

" That is not my concern. I have enough public charities to shepherd without adding private ones to the list. I have given her the address of Lady Leamington-Cresswell, who attends to such cases, and it is up to the girl to go to her for advice."

" But what will she do ? take Fanny in till the baby is born, then find a foster mother for the child, that she might go out to service ? Oh, poor Fanny ! How wretched for her not to have her own baby and home. Did you ask who was the man ? "

" My dear Nadia ! What do you take me for ? If I once began putting my finger into such pies, I'd pretty soon have more than I can do. Besides, I am not curious. I hate meddling in the private concerns of that class. They are generally sordid and revolting. Now, please don't mention this again. It isn't a subject that bears discussion."

Lady Donithorne could not say more plainly that it was specially painful because of the memories evoked, and that Nadia should be the last to desire to speak of it.

Nadia blushed at the rebuke, and quietly left the room. A while later, she was knocking gently on Fanny's door.

" Let me in, Fanny—it's Miss Nadia. I want to help you."

Needless to say the door immediately yielded, and Nadia was admitted. Fanny, with swollen eyes, was beginning to pack her things, as she was expected to leave that evening.

"Oh, Fanny, I am so sorry for you!"

"Oh, Miss, it's kind of you to say it, and I always knew your heart was kind." Fresh tears flowed into Fanny's apron.

"May I sit down?"

"Of course, Miss! To think of arsking!"

"If I can do anything, I am quite ready. But you must confide in me, Fanny. Who was it who has treated you so badly?"

"Oh, Miss, he didn't mean for to treat me badly," sobbed Fanny. "I don't blame him, it was all of our being that taken up and wanting to marry and no ways to do it. We—we——"

"Who is he, Fanny?"

"It's Robert Jones what brings the milk in the mornings along with the old 'un. It is like this. We have been 'walking out' for six months from my last place, and I—I love him so! He and me wanted nothing so much as to be married, but Bob is only now nineteen, and his wages is twenty-five shillings. Till he gets raised, we can't keep house, even if I work. After he's twenty-one, he has a promise of being taken into the shop, but—but——" and she sobbed bitterly.

"You couldn't wait, because you saw each other so often and each time it grew harder and harder!"

"Oh, Miss! You do understand—and you so young, too!"

"How old are you, Fanny?"

"Sixteen last birthday, Miss."

Nadia was infinitely pitiful. It was the old story of life's springtime! She was a little curious to know if Fanny's case was in any other respect also like her own.

" But—you knew it was wrong? Surely you knew it was wrong? "

Fanny was filled with embarrassment and had no language for the expression of her thoughts; she hesitated, stumbled, and sobbed.

" I dunno as how it happened, Miss. We used to sit on the Common by the hedge and talk about him loving me and me loving him; and then, the darkness and all —though I knew what's what, it didn't make it any easier—but harder. Sometimes, I am thinking that it's better not to know too much. When we know——" her voice choked.

Nadia nodded. " Yes—knowing all is like setting a light to a fuse, it goes on till——"

" Yes, Miss. You do put it wonderful."

" And now, what is to be done? "

" That's jest what's——" Fanny's head disappeared into her apron.

" That's where I want to come in. I cannot bear to think, Fanny, that you and Bobby should not be married. He must marry you *before*, not after the baby is born."

" But—he can't! He is living with his mother, Miss, and she would turn him outer doors if she got to know wot he's bin after, and no mistake about it. She's a Methodist and goes to meeting, and for her Bobby to have gone and done wrong!—Bobby daresn't tell her."

" That's what religious people call Christianity! "

" As for me," Fanny sobbed, " she would never let me darken her doors no more."

" Well, I'm going to see Bobby. Tell me where I can get him now."

" At eleven, he'll be having his lunch, Miss, wot he eats at the Beer and Skittles, a public-house by the lock."

Nadia saw that she had time to get there, and comforted Fanny by saying she was sure she'd manage something.

The " something " she managed was to call Bobby Jones to her car, when a newspaper boy succeeded in locating him seated on a bench munching a hunk of cheese and bread, and she made a proposition.

" I have come about Fanny——"

Immediately his face stiffened. Self-preservation being a law of nature, she could see that Bobby was preparing his defence. He had, probably, many sound reasons for refusing to right the wrong he had done. Whether or not he loved the girl truly, he had no wish to be forced into tying a millstone round his neck.

" Poor Fanny is very unhappy, and if something isn't done quickly, she will lose her character. That isn't fair, is it? "

Bobby looked up into the fresh young face, wondering what a grand lady like her should want interfering with working people's business. But the fuss and to-do the quality made nowadays over unmarried mothers was extraordinary. Time was, when they usedter pull their skirts aside and look t'other way. With these here short skirts, it seemed they had nothing ter pull!—so they meddled in people's concerns, dreadful.

" 'Tain't a question of fairness," said he, sullenly, " but where one can't do nothink, nothink can be done. What's done, can't be undone, and a man can't be spliced on twenty-five bob a week, Miss."

" I believe you love each other, Bob Jones? " The human note in Nadia's voice must have touched a chord in his heart, for he blushed and shifted his feet.

" We've been walkin' out, but things happen, as it isn't seemly for to talk to a young lady about. All comes of spooning along of the dark, and a man's not made of stone, Miss."

" Poor Fanny! I am only thinking that it is always hard on the girl, and Fanny's going to have a hell of a time unless you stand by her like a man." Her language took colour from the necessity of the occasion, for there were some words that appealed to Bob Jones's class

more than others, she knew, and the case was urgent. " You look a fine, manly fellow, and I can't believe that you want Fanny to go under, so I am going to suggest that you give up the dairy business and learn driving cars. If you care to think about it, I will pay all expenses for you to learn at a garage. There are one or two that would take you on and finish you with a diploma or certificate in a very short time. After that, my mother would give you the job of chauffeur. I know she does not like the man she has, he is a surly fellow, and not always sober. We often suspect that he hires himself and the car out on the nights he knows that my mother won't want him, and that's bad. How would you like such a job? The pay is good, and there is the cottage over the garage, which give free quarters."

Bob Jones's eyes widened with surprise and eagerness.

" Oh, Miss, it's just the sorter job I'd give anything to get. I'll drive in no time, trust me, Miss. Is that a real offer? "

" Yes. To-morrow you can call at Timpson's garage at Staines, and it can be fixed up. I'll go on there at once. I know the manager, so it will be all right. After that, lose no time in fixing up the marriage at any register office. While you are learning, Fanny can stay in lodgings—I'll arrange that, also, and give her something to get along on."

The boy's face was transformed. " Right oh, Miss. I'll see Fanny to-night about getting spliced. Golly! won't the poor kid be glad! "

" You'll have to be good to her, Jones! "

" You bet your life, Miss. Why, her and me was walking out, and I did mean right by her, so help me God! only, there was no way of raising the money, and jobs don't fall like rain from heaven, as you can see, Miss, by the list of unemployed wot's getting the dole."

" I am so glad that is settled," said Nadia, preparing to drive on, and only just becoming aware of the

curiosity she was exciting in the minds of the loafers that were hanging round the steps of the bar entrance to the tavern. "Fanny will be so happy to be allowed to care for her own baby, and not have it fostered like a charity kid. Good luck to you, Mr. Jones."

Jones pulled the peak of his cap, grinning all over his face. In the place of the scolding and threats he was expecting, he was made to feel not such a bad sort, after all.

And Nadia, driving away in her car, was thinking of Jasper. What he had done for her, she was trying to do for another girl not so well placed as herself, and only *she* knew what his help had meant to her in her despair and misery. "We do wrong," she was thinking, "but to be refused help of the only sort worth while because we deserve to suffer, doesn't make us any better women or show us the way to retrieve ourselves."

She wanted to run to Jasper and say, "Wylber is coming!—keep me with you—hold me—hide me. I mustn't see him. If I see him—I will not answer for myself, for I belong to him. He was mine before Petal took him, and I know I can get him back."

But where was Jasper?

CHAPTER X

A GARDEN PARTY

I

A MONTH had passed, and August was well advanced when Nadia's devouring suspense was at last ended by a telephone call from Petal. There had been no news, and Nadia had just sufficient strength of mind not to go out of her way to ask for any of Belle Freeman who could have told her anything she wanted to know, as she had a superstitious dread of meeting temptation half-way, so she had schooled herself to patience till her nerves were on edge and her appetite had vanished.

With pulses bounding, she heard Petal's voice in her ear asking for "Miss Nadia Donithorne."

"Speaking," said she, keeping her excitement out of her voice. "Is that you, Petal? When did you arrive? I have been wondering where you were."

"Oh, Nadia! I have so much to tell you. The fact is, I have been so unwell that I lost all interest in life, but I am now better, though not quite sure of myself. Anyway, I want you so to come round. We are all three at the Cecil, but, to-day, I am quite alone, as Wyl has gone to spend the day in the country—*Basingbrook*, of all places!—just to 'look at old haunts'? Did you ever?—and Mother—Mrs. Young, I mean—is with her daughter Kate, who is going to

have her second baby any day soon. If you come, we can have the jolliest chat. I should like you to see Wyl now, he has become such a big fellow, everyone says. Belle is giving a party for us, and I only hope I shall keep well enough to go. Can you guess what's the matter?—please try. But do come to-day if you can."

"I'll come at once. So nice to know that we shan't be interrupted."

"Isn't it? Oh, by the way, will you get me some two-ply wool, Beehive, I think, for I've got to get busy! Now can you guess?"

"Ask me another!" said Nadia to humour her. "How very mysterious you are!"

"Oh, Nadia! how obtuse! Can't you wake up? I am going to have a baby! That is, Mother is sure of it, only the doctor says that he prefers to wait before giving a definite opinion. I am so glad, I could dance with joy, only I've got to be so careful. Only imagine me with a real, live baby—not a baby *doll!*"

"You are a baby yourself," said Nadia, a hand clutching her heart. She was thinking that Wylber was the father—and that he was also the father of——

"Belle tells me that you came in for a fortune not long ago," Petal continued. "Lucky girl! We have only just enough to do ourselves fairly well with, taking Wyl's and my income together. But he's to get all Uncle leaves, so, some day, we hope to be well off."

"Yes, I'm very lucky. It is nice to feel that I am perfectly independent. She was my godmother and aunt, and her boys were killed in the war. So many families lost boys in the war! Shall I take you for a run in my car?"

"Wouldn't I love it! But I am so afraid of doing anything to disappoint my hopes."

"The car is perfectly safe, and it's early to begin being careful!"

"We'll see when you are here. Hurry up!"

Nadia hung up the receiver as in a dream, and stood a while in the deep bay window looking out on the Thames, thinking of Wylber at Basingbrook. Why had he gone there? His father was the Vicar there for years, and he was, possibly, anxious to renew old associations. . . . Or had he gone straight to the woods?—their woods, overlooking the little town, where they used to picnic in a little dell on a carpet of dead leaves, and learn from Nature the meaning of love?

Nadia's eyes followed a strip of river at the bottom of the lawn along which boats flashed in the sunshine, with gay parasols and the gleam of white frocks reflected in the water, but she was blind to the picture while another of rural loveliness rose before her mental vision. It was only three years ago that she had lain in her boy-lover's arms in the shade of the overhanging boughs, and——

He was now Petal's husband!

Yet, he had gone to Basingbrook to look at old haunts!

Her heart beat wildly as she turned away to prepare for the drive into town.

Was Wylber visiting the grave of their love in hopes of a resurrection? Had the soil of England brought back the past to him?

II

Petal met her at the gates of the lift, which proved how she had been listening and watching for her coming, and Nadia saw the same girl, unchanged, save for the fact that her long plait was no more, and in its place was a rope of twisted hair forming a cushion

behind her head. It had the effect of making Petal seem dowdy, also because of her skirts, as they were well below the prescribed length.

"Funny how time makes no difference to our feelings for each other," said she, linking an arm within Nadia's. "It all comes of being children together. I can never talk to anyone as I can talk to you!—but, you fill me with awe! You look just like a fashion plate. How do you do it?—I mean, the way your clothes hang—the lines, and all. But, isn't your skirt rather too short?"

"I like it like this," said Nadia.

"But—when you sit down!—gracious, the sights you see in tubes and buses! I love your shoes, Nadia! You must show me where to get a pair like yours. You have become so pretty, Nadia."

"I am glad you think so," said Nadia, laughing.

"Everyone thinks so. Belle raves about you and your clothes. You used to be so pale and thin."

"I am pale now when I don't rouge."

"You surely don't rouge!" cried Petal, as if she thought that Nadia's soul was in danger of damnation by her rouging.

They argued for a while on the subject of improving nature by art, their tongues wagging as in old days. Petal wanted to know if Nadia's hair was naturally that shade of red-brown, or if it had always been doctored.

"Oh, no. My hair is as Nature made it. Had it not been so bright, I should certainly have used a preparation to brighten it."

"I'm afraid I have been brought up to think that all artificiality is cheap and to be despised. Wylber hates all that, and says that only the *demi-mondaine* go in for that sort of thing."

"Tell him from me that he is talking like a Non-conformist parson. The best people use aids, and the more artistic they are, the better the result. To do

it inartistically, is to look a *demi-mondaine*, if you like, for that crowd are incapable of art."

"I wonder what you will think of Wylber. He's so nice-looking, that I feel terribly proud of going out with him; and he says the same of me. The worst of Wylber is, that he is too romantic and passionate. I look forward to the day when we are old, and he less exacting. I am tired of telling him that I hate demonstrativeness, and he is nothing if not demonstrative. We have terrible rows, you know, and it upsets me so. His mother says that I am cruel to her boy," and Petal lowered her tones and entered into intimate details of her married life, beginning with the first night of the honeymoon, which had been a fiasco. Nadia was left to infer that Petal was incapable of understanding the give and take of married obligations. She knew that she was well able to open Petal's eyes, for though the same age, her education had been on broader lines and she had gained a better grasp of things. However, she was determined not to interfere, as natural jealousy tied her tongue and made her glow inwardly to think that Petal was ruining her own cause with Wylber and preparing the way for her rival. It was abominable of her, she knew, but was in no mood to be magnanimous and helpful. There were books written that would enlighten Petal, if she would only take the trouble to read them; but it was likely as not, that she would regard such books as indecent and obscene, when they were purely scientific and practical.

Nadia thought that the attitude of Petal's mind towards sex was all wrong, and that it would be very long before she realized her mistake. Only some great mental upheaval could effect a change speedily. As long as Petal looked upon the physical side of married life as "beastly," she was incapable of holding the husband she had won, and her blood be on her own head. What she wanted from her husband was a love purged of all natural desire, and as pure as her own.

" ' Blessed are the pure in spirit,' " said Petal, " ' for they shall see God.' " What was the good of the Beatitudes, if they were to be disregarded?

" You have a queer mentality," said Nadia.

" Then you don't sympathize? " pouted Petal.

" I certainly don't. You seem to have missed the point altogether."

" What point? I am going to have a baby, and that's point enough for me. Surely it should content Wylber as it contents me. Marriage was constituted for the purpose, and that purpose has been served."

" If you talk in this way to your husband, I can see you are riding for a fall, let me warn you. Presently he will find some other woman who will appreciate his ideas on the subject of love better."

" That is horrid of you! Wylber isn't immoral. Only unfaithful and immoral husbands behave like that."

" My dear Petal, you are a sleep-walker," said Nadia. " Come for a run in my car. We are arguing round and round the mulberry bush."

" Let us first have lunch," said Petal. After luncheon, however, she was undecided and fearful of catastrophes, but after much argument she consented to a ride in Nadia's luxurious two-seater. The latter dropped her at the Cecil and, afterwards, returned home, her nerves in a state of prostration. She thought, judging from Petal's conversation, that anyone of intelligence compelled to be in daily intercourse with her, would be a fit subject for a mental hospital.

It was a queer state of affairs:

Petal without an understanding of Life.

Wylber repulsed and disappointed.

Wylber spending the day among old haunts to remind himself of a love he had flung away!

And Nadia?

Nadia like a diver on the brink of deep waters, preparing to plunge.

II

A week later, Lady Donithorne gave one of her garden parties for which her place on the river was famous, and it was made the first occasion of a meeting between Nadia and Wylber.

"Is there anyone you would like to ask?" from her mother, gave Nadia the opportunity of yielding to a temptation that had been assailing her, to bring about a meeting, since Wylber hung back.

"I shall ask Petal and her husband, Mr. Young," said she; "they are over from Canada, and I ought to show them some civility."

Lady Donithorne consented readily, and read out the list of guests she had invited, among them the gentleman who was showing a decided partiality for her daughter's society and whose attentions she considered a very great honour.

"The Honourable Maxwell Disney," said Lady Donithorne, looking up from the paper. "I need hardly say, Nadia, that I shall be acutely disappointed if you do not value this man's regard. He will be here, a certainty, and I do expect you to give him more of your society than you give the others. I happen to know that he means to ask you, in the near future, to marry him, and both your father and I would be more than pleased to give our consent. He is related, on his mother's side, to Royalty, and has a private entree to Buckingham Palace. That he should have honoured you so highly, is something to be proud of, so be sensible of it and make us all happy."

The colour crept slowly into Nadia's cheek, and her lids fell.

"I think," she murmured, "that you have forgotten what I told you, long ago."

"What was that?" her mother asked, uncomfortably, for she feared a covert reference to things long buried.

She was not mistaken.

"I said, when we were at Nice, that I would never marry a man to whom I could not give my story. It is possible to marry a man one does not love, though I don't think I shall ever love any man enough to want to marry him; but it is impossible to cheat him into thinking me what I am not."

"Hush! I have forbidden any reference to the past. Foolish girl! What man in the world is what you would like to think him?"

"I expect nothing of a man," said Nadia, quietly, "so I am not likely to be deceived. He probably expects a girl in my class and position to be above reproach. The man I marry must know all about me. Since I could not, in my wildest imagination, dream of confiding in the Honourable Maxwell Disney, I don't mean to encourage his intentions. So far, I have persisted in being outwardly indifferent, but, unfortunately, it has had the opposite effect, so my only hope is in not giving him a chance to speak to me alone."

Lady Donithorne grew very angry, as was frequent of late, for it seemed that she was totally unable to influence Nadia.

"Is there nothing in which you will do as we wish? Are we not entitled to some consideration from our own child? You owe me much. I have saved you from your father's wrath and contempt."

"That has been a great regret to me. But since you were determined, and I have had to respect your wishes——"

"Why not respect my wishes in this matter and sink your foolish over-sensitiveness on the point for the general good?"

But Nadia shook her head. "I will not marry

Mr. Disney, whatever happens. I refused to start my married life on a lie."

Lady Donithorne looked hysterical, but as her great dignity refused to be humiliated with tears, she closed her lips and resorted to tact. She would say no more about it, and Nadia might be won to change her mind by Mr. Disney himself.

The invitations were sent out and accepted by most of those honoured, and a bright sun favoured the occasion. Never had the grounds of Auburndale House looked more beautiful than on the day of the party, turning the flower-beds into a glory of colour, and the river, with its merry boat-loads, into a scene of movement and sheer delight.

Nothing could have been so captivating as the green lawns and pretty frocks, the animated faces, and purple shadows under the maples and elms where refreshments were served, and a string band played dreamily. A corner nearer the water's edge was favoured by most of the younger set, for beneath a willow's drooping branches was a hammock and easy chairs and a view of the river rippling by, bearing on its bosom lovers of aquatic sport, and lovers of Love, while happy voices floated on the soft summer air.

Looking back on that afternoon, Nadia felt that it was the turning-point of her life. At the time, it was a bewildering maze of colour and dazzling sunbeams filtering through leaves, with laughter and music and fun as she flitted among her mother's guests trying to do her duty to all, while a particular pair of eyes, among other eyes, followed her every movement.

Nadia knew she was looking her best. She had the immense advantage over most girls of knowing how to dress and how to wear her clothes, which gave the effect of always being the best-dressed girl in any company of which she was a member.

She was looking infinitely alluring in her smart ivory silk georgette, that defined the graceful contours of

her, making her a thing of beauty sparkling with animation. Slim, erect, vivacious, wearing a garden hat of fine straw and rose leaves, under which, framing her face, was the dark russet of her hair.

"What a face it is!" said a new acquaintance to an old. "There is plenty of character there!"

"A lovely face," said his companion.

"I wouldn't say so—but a fascinating face. I wish I was fifteen years younger!"

Nadia tried to recall how it had happened that Wylber, from the first, had gravitated to her side like steel to the magnet; and the thrill of triumph she had experienced when she gave him her hand and knew by his eyes that he was unable to resist the call of the past.

"Wylber says that he would have passed you in a crowd as a stranger," said Petal's voice, breaking the spell of the moment, and Nadia, flashing an insolent look of disdain, said:

"Wylber has a short memory for his—friends."

"Oh!" cried Wylber, reproachfully, "you know you have changed out of all recollection!"

"Is there nothing to show I am the same girl you met at Basingbrook?"

"Your eyes and hair could never change," he ventured, while the group of men around her laughed at his evident embarrassment.

"What a mercy I refrained from dyeing it!" she cried gaily, and moved on as if his presence there was of the least moment to her. What a boy he was, still! but how widened and developed.

The open-air life had improved him beyond imagination—a man, yet only a boy in mind, Nadia could see, from the look in his eyes of resentful self-consciousness, and the inability to hide his feelings. The wistful look he bent on her glowing face, was the look of one who had not found his bearings after a storm-tossed voyage. He had reached out to Petal

for the paradise he had lost, and was disillusioned and dismayed, and his laughter had the ring of defiance.

What an evening descended on the gay garden, with its music and movement and laughter! What a twilight of pearly mists and deepening shadows, with the party dwindling in numbers and pairing by attraction. Shadowed nooks with a seat for two were quickly occupied; and couples finding the river inviting, raided the boat-house for punts and poled out of sight under the willows bordering the shore, where presently they ceased to pole, for the backwaters of the Thames in the upper reaches, are kind to young lovers, where the tide eddies gently and love-birds are twittering in their nests.

Nadia knew that Wylber, at her elbow, was hinting about punting in the afterglow of the sunset among willows and reeds while the tide moved slowly out, but he had not the courage to ask her frankly, and to punish him, she made up a party for her motor-boat, purposely leaving him out, as Petal declined to take risks. Sitting at the wheel like a water sprite in her cool, clinging frock, her face radiant with an inward glow, she took her guests for a spin, rejoicing because of the disappointment visible in his eyes. She was glad!—glad with a cruel gladness because he was sad.

She was glad, because he had seen her eagerly sought by many men, not only because she was an heiress and her people of some note in society, but because she could say quick and amusing things and make them laugh. She was the antipodes of Petal, who sat dully beautiful without a word to say, because self-centred and ignorant, and full of the conceit of fools! Oh, the bitterness at her heart, because of Petal!

She was glad, because it did not matter that she hadn't Petal's beauty. Nobody cared for Petal, while they would not leave her alone.

It was wine in her blood, to hear herself claimed

by one and another for engagements to dance and to dine in town; for Wylber, never far from her elbow, heard.

Was he thinking of all he had lost? "When you and I are a few years older, we'll get married," he had said more than once to her. Was he thinking of that now and grieving? They were older, but he had married Petal, only to discover that he loved Nadia still!

Oh, he did not need to tell her how it was with him. Every look from him direct to her eyes, told her wordlessly the truth.

And she laughed.

How long would she laugh? . . .

When she returned from the river, the remaining guests were taking their leave, and Petal rose to say good-bye.

"I must go, I am so tired," she said, in her new, languid pose, giving Nadia a meaning glance. "Come, Wyl, please carry my cloak and give me your arm."

The affectation made Nadia sick.

"Take great care of her, Wylber. Good-bye, Petal," said she, with malice, and Petal led him away like a reluctant schoolboy.

Nadia did not know herself, she was so mean and hateful. She felt like some ugly vampire adventuress on evil bent, and was silent and ashamed all the evening; and so she retired to bed, but not to sleep, for her mind was obsessed.

Wylber! her boy—he remembered!

Nothing had been said, yet her whole being was obsessed with the knowledge that everything would be said, presently. He would find a way, for the effect of her coldness was maddening to him.

What terrified her was the thought that it was all in her own hands, for she would yet find that she could do with Wylber as she pleased. With those memories between them, nothing would keep him long from her.

It was all in her own hands!

What would she decide to do with him? Take his life's happiness in her two hands and break it? Or forgive his effort to forget her, and chain him to her like a slave?

With her cheek pressed to the pillow, she told herself what she would do, and lay in a wonderland of dreams, while passion, no longer silent, but resurrected from the dead, whispered—whispered. Every fibre of her body responded to reawakened desire for her one love, while she told herself of her right above Petal to possess him. He had loved her first, and would love her last.

What had she said to him that afternoon? It was difficult to recall, for they had never been quite alone

"A beautiful house—a perfectly lovely garden."

"Yes, we chose it for that."

"Ideal for summer parties."

"We give them frequently."

"I love the river." It had been a hint for invitations to him, alone, but she did not take it.

"I practically live on it. . . ."

"How very pretty Petal looks," she once said to him.

"Yes," without enthusiasm, at which her heart glowed.

To her pillow she whispered: "Darling, darling!" He was pressed, in imagination, to her heart—her lips were on his, she could almost sense the feel of them, as of old, and breathe the earthy scents and night dews.

When day dawned and the sun shone frankly and searchingly as if into her very soul, she was frightened and ashamed, seeing herself as if standing on the edge of a bottomless pit in the grip of an irresistible force. The weakness of human nature when passion had the upper hand, was a terrifying thing, for the power to resist was gone.

One thought remained even in the glare of daylight to haunt her with strange allure:

Wylber did not know of her experience in Paris! What would he say when he was told?

Nadia knew she would tell him . . . who had a greater right to know?

Yet, when it was day, and the sunlight chased away the shadows even from her mind, she found that she was recalling the previous afternoon in a spirit of criticism, with the figure of Wylber at a disadvantage compared with the polished men of society who were present—Mr. Disney's self-possession and charming manners had made Wylber's appear raw. He was a splendid animal, having for women a powerful physical attraction, but in mind, he was still a boy. She had grown up and left him far behind. His embarrassment in her presence had made him awkward and tongue-tied. He had not the gift of polite camouflage, and his eyes gave him utterly away to all but his wife. When people told her that she had made a complete conquest of her old boy-friend, and that it was very naughty of her, seeing that he had lately taken unto himself a wife, she knew that Wylber was thinking of the old days and cursing himself for not having waited, and her heart melted towards him.

Yes. He was just the sort of boy to have captured the romantic attachment of a schoolgirl, to make *blasé* women weaken for him, but to Nadia, who had graduated early in wisdom, and was not *blasé*, there was something lacking. She had expected more, and was disappointed.

Still—he was Wylber—*her Wylber*, and she would not be critical, for he was coming back to her—she knew it—as sure as the sun was in the sky.

III

Nadia was made to feel the weight of her mother's displeasure the day after the garden party, for it had been, in her eyes, a thorough failure. The object for which she had arranged it, was defeated by Nadia's obstinate folly. She had kept her word, and given Mr. Disney no chance to propose because of her determination not to accept him. Lady Donithorne would rather she had received the proposal even to refuse it, so that her mother could, at least, tell her dear friends, in confidence, of the honour, allowing it to be seen that the Donithornes were not as worldly-minded as people imagined. That their daughter had refused the younger son of an earl—a man of distinction and related on his mother's side to Royalty, would indeed have been a triumph. But Nadia had no appreciation of her opportunities.

Lady Donithorne had watched it all from the terrace, where certain personages were being entertained by herself and her husband, while the younger set played tennis, roamed the walks, and later, went boating, and Nadia, who had never shown to such great advantage, was the disappointment of her mother's life. With Mr. Disney seeking every opportunity to be alone with her, she *would* have that Canadian boy hanging about her, neglecting Petal, his wife, and leaving her to bore the men Nadia introduced to her!

But there was little use in recriminations, for Nadia was bound to have an answer ready that would make her mother appear in the wrong. Marriage was certainly her own affair, and no mother made a success of match-making.

"I never saw such a fiasco in my life," Lady Donithorne remarked at the breakfast-table, to her husband, for Nadia's benefit. "It isn't encouraging to those who entertain, and I shall not be in a hurry to repeat yesterday afternoon's party this summer."

"But why?" asked Lord Donithorne. "Everyone seemed to be having a good time. I'll wager Nadia did," his eyes twinkling.

"I dare say. She pleased herself at the expense of others."

"I did what I imagined people liked best, that is, showed them the way to enjoy themselves, and as far as I could see, they certainly did, without any assistance from me," said Nadia, in self-defence. "People hate stiff parties—especially young people, and much prefer being allowed to enjoy themselves in their own way."

"Which I consider is exceedingly selfish. As far as I could see," said her mother, with dignified disapproval, "it was a Jack and Jill affair, and degenerated into commonness."

"Oh, no," said her husband, protestingly. "It was absolutely decent and proper."

"As far as you know! You retired early with three others to the library and played bridge, so——"

"I always came and had a look around, when dummy."

"I can't expect much from Nadia when you support her and do much the same—that is, please yourself when we have guests."

"Well, my dear, I took Lord Rathborne, Colonel Wargrave and the dear old bishop to the library for cards, as they were aching for a rubber. The others seemed to be able to look after themselves, and with you and Nadia there——"

"That was just my complaint. Nadia was there, but I did not see that it mattered very much. The worst

taste she showed was to make Mr. Disney over to Petal Young and expect him to be entertained. I have never in my life seen such a tragedy as Grace Honeywell's upbringing of Petal. There she was, hard to beat for looks—the prettiest girl present, and of no use to anyone. I could have counted the minutes between the remarks she made when people were told off to sit with her. Mr. Disney had very uphill work to get any sense out of her, I could see, for I spent a few minutes near by, while listening to Mrs. Toyneby-Walker's account of her motor smash, and all I could gather was that Petal had no other idea in her head but her own delicate condition. She gave it away obviously to everyone, she is so pleased and proud."

"Oh, Mother! Petal is far too refined for that!" said Nadia.

"She implied it, I tell you. She didn't play tennis —she would rather not—in fact, she had not brought her tennis shoes as—oh, she would not be playing all summer. She thought it better not to attempt boating as the movements of the boat always upset her—at least, lately. All her conversation worked round the subject of herself and her condition, till one needed to be a fool not to understand."

"She's a brainless little thing," said her husband, "but a picture."

"A doll, you mean, and preferring a glass case to company. Her mother and I once had almost a quarrel over her theories. She had her own notions how to bring up girls, and this is the result. Petal's brains have been undeveloped in order to keep her mind pure!"

Lord Donithorne smiled indulgently.

"She's young yet. Give her time. Ten years hence she'll be wiser and make a jolly good mother, I should think."

"She's maternal right through," said Nadia, "but a disappointing wife. Wylber is bored to tears, anyone can see that."

"Well, leave him to it," said her mother. "It's his funeral. I saw no occasion for his following you round like a dog on the lead. It will not do you any good. A childhood's friendship is all very well, but now the boy is married, he has his duty to his wife and has no right to neglect her, as he did yesterday, to trail after you."

"Tut-tut!" murmured Lord Donithorne. "Don't make too much of it. Nadia is a minx"—affectionately—"and, I dare say, did a bit of vamping, as they call it, but there's no harm done."

"Personally, I thought I behaved very well. I never took any advantage of the old friendship, and was rather discouraging," said Nadia, colouring. "I did no vamping."

"You did not need to, as far as it appeared." Thus, her mother. "Boys of Wylber Young's age are dangerous, for they are generally undisciplined and impulsive. He's very good-looking, and the girls are inclined to make a fuss of him, as it is. Don't add to their number, for there is nothing I dislike so much as gossip, and it will be asking for it, if he repeats yesterday's performance too often. Petal will then have a right to object."

IV

Later in the day, Lady Donithorne made a discovery and sent for Nadia in her boudoir where she generally attended to her correspondence. Nadia was convicted of taking too much upon herself and pulled strings to such an extent that her mother was humiliated.

"Did you send for me, Mother?" said Nadia, entering, and perching on the window-sill, where she

had a view of the glittering Thames and its ceaseless traffic of barges and pleasure-boats.

"I did. It is about this matter of the new chauffeur. I don't mean that I am finding fault with him. He drives quite well, but you never told me that the maid I dismissed is his wife? I saw Fanny sweeping out the garage while Jones was washing the car, and when I asked what she was doing there, I was made to feel infinitely small, I assure you, after she said that she was occupying the cottage over the garage; for I did not know they were married till it was explained. It was natural for me to be shocked that the girl should have the audacity to be living *with my chauffeur* when I had dismissed her, at a moment's notice, for having gone wrong while in service. Can't you see the awkwardness of the position?" Lady Donithorne looked agitated, as she could not help being when confronted with her daughter's calm assurance in circumstances that were excessively annoying. Nadia's imperturbable self-confidence was something of an aggression in her mother's eyes. Considering the past and all she owed her mother, Lady Donithorne had expected a servile humility and dutiful behaviour; instead, Nadia passed from a flapper to a *débutante* with a mind and will of her own that was the despair of her ambitious and dignified parent.

"I'm terribly sorry, dear," said Nadia, her eyes following the clumsy handling of a sailing-boat in mid-stream. "They'll have it over in a minute, if they don't look out!"

"Are you attending to me?" said Lady Donithorne, sternly.

"I said I was sorry, dear. I did not tell you about Fanny, as I was afraid you would refuse to have her about the place. Not that she would need to be about the place, but as Jones was the man responsible, and he had done the decent thing, I got you to give him the job. Naturally, his wife now lives with him."

"I, certainly, would not have taken Jones into my employ if I had known he was the man, for a man who can be such a coward as to ruin a young girl, is worthless and immoral. One doesn't willingly employ that sort."

"It was only the certainty of this job that enabled him to marry at once, or he would have had to wait till he could find work. Time was precious, and Fanny had to be considered."

"All I can say is that you are becoming far too interfering. I resent being dragged into this, and I shall give Jones notice."

"To spite me?"

"To be a lesson to you not to meddle in matters unsuitable to your age and circumstances. I do not descend to petty spite."

Lady Donithorne was greatly flustered and shaken, as it was difficult to reprove one who was so composed, and capable of holding her own.

"Surely, Mother, you would not go to such lengths? There isn't any occasion. You could consider the incident closed, and show magnanimity towards the poor things."

"After being made to look foolish!—for them to see that I had been used by my own daughter as a tool!—why, it's an impossible position! Let your father judge."

"Don't let us turn such a small thing into an issue!" pleaded Nadia. "I pledged Jones he should have the billet, and they are now so happy. Jones is a good driver. I should feel mean if you let them down, and would have to do something for them."

"Jones will find no difficulty in getting work elsewhere. I should hate to have him driving my car after knowing he has got the better of his mistress in this matter."

"It would never occur to him. He would be too glad to remain in your employ, and would admire you all the more for your kindness and generosity. It seems

to me, people can do sinners so much more good if they only had a little human sympathy for them."

"You are too young to offer an opinion on the point."

"I—speak from experience," said Nadia, daringly.

Lady Donithorne swung round and looked at her daughter in bitter reproach.

"You know my feelings on that subject, and it is the worst possible taste that you should wound me as you do."

"I am *so* sorry," said Nadia, in despair. "I don't seem ever to do the right thing. Perhaps it would be better if I lived somewhere else."

It was a suggestion, not a threat, but it threw Lady Donithorne into a passion, as she regarded the remark as provocative.

"Because you have been left all that money, unconditionally, by Aunt Julia, is it giving you swelled head? Do you think that it justifies you in behaving as if you are independent of your parents and all you owe to them while you are under twenty-one? I am utterly disappointed in you, Nadia. In order to get your way, you threaten me with a remark like that! You had better live 'elsewhere!'"

In vain Nadia tried to explain that she thought her mother would be the happier for a separation from her daughter, who was always doing the wrong thing.

"I don't know what it is, but you have changed very much," Lady Donithorne said, mopping her eyes and ashamed of her loss of self-command. "I always feel that some day you will bring a terrible scandal on us by this independent spirit that brooks no control." Her great respect for the opinion of her world still governed Lady Donithorne's outlook on life.

"I am afraid, I am rather difficult because I look at things from such a different angle! However, I do beg of you not to send Jones away or I shall have to find him another post immediately, and it will be difficult

to explain the reason of his dismissal without giving away the fact that Jones's private affairs occasioned a quarrel between my mother and me."

"Isn't that disgraceful?" cried the exasperated woman.

"It is. I should hate people to 'talk,'" said Nadia, with a twinkle in her eye.

"Have your own way," said Lady Donithorne, capitulating. Nadia had got her on her weak spot, and surrender was inevitable, but the feeling rankled, and she nursed bitter feelings against her child who had never been a comfort to her in any sense, and had so nearly been a disgrace.

CHAPTER XI

DREAMS AND REALITIES

I

A WEEK after the garden party, Nadia had reason to believe that Wylber was haunting the river at Auburndale in the hope of seeing her. Petal telephoned that Wylber was neglecting her shamefully at a time when he should have been full of tender consideration for her, and went on to say that he had suddenly been seized with a passion for boating exercise, and someone said he had been seen at Staines.

Why Staines? thought Nadia, if not to hire a boat and drop past Auburndale?

"We had a row about it," said Petal in the mouthpiece, "and it is so bad for me to be agitated. But I was within my rights as his wife to object to his spending every day away from me. He goes after breakfast in his flannels and school blazer which he is so sentimental about, and we don't see him till very late. He is too often away from dinner, and I think it so unkind. A girl doesn't marry to have some other woman chasing after her husband. You told me that it might happen if I did not make Wylber happy in his own way, and it seems coming true very soon. What am I to do? He doesn't bother much if I cry about it or not. A short time back, if I cried, he gave in at once. Now when I begin, he says that I behave like a baby, and just goes out of the room. Oh, Nadia, if this goes on I shall be utterly wretched, for it is

dreadful to have a husband who has ceased to care for one and runs after other women."

Petal sounded tearful, and Nadia had a twinge of pity for her.

It did not last, because she felt that Petal had only herself to blame for acting like a simpleton and a prude. No man would stand it long, and little wonder that Wylber preferred to spend his time away.

She was deeply excited at the thought of Wylber haunting Auburndale—for she was sure he could have gone nowhere else after that look in his eyes. She was ready to stake all she had on the certainty that he was not far from the house at that very moment—too shy and frightened to seek her boldly lest she should crush him with her scorn, but living in hopes of luck. Oh, he well knew that he deserved her contempt for his silence and desertion. They would have a reckoning yet, on that score! and then—she would probably forgive him, because he was Wylber—her first and only love. Women forgave the men they loved, every sin in the Decalogue.

Nadia could hardly wait for Petal to finish her complaints, she longed so to hang up the receiver and watch the river.

"You must blame yourself for mismanaging your chances, Petal," she said, unsympathetically. "You don't understand the A B C of Life, and haven't the foggiest idea of men. You want them to be plaster saints when they are human creatures endowed by God with normal healthy instincts which it is criminal of wives to ignore. You've been asking for this, and I warned you, didn't I?"

"You did, and I have been wondering how you know so much? But you were always a marvel, Nadia! Now, what am I to do?"

"Think about it," said Nadia, "and grow up quickly. Don't dream of dolls and babies and

wonderful prams, but of a man's love, for there is nothing so wonderful in the world."

"Oh, Nadia!"

"Yes," said Nadia, with a lump in her throat, because of the love she had lost ere it was found, "and think how you, Wylber's *wife*, had the pull over every other woman, and did not make the most of it!"

"What am I to do?" wailed Petal, now evidently in tears.

"Do what you can. I can't advise you." Nadia felt that it was only fair to give Petal the chance of realizing her folly and mending it, if she had the wit. She could do no more.

For the rest, Fate would have to decide the issue. The thought of Wylber on the river, possibly haunting the spot down by the willows in the hope of meeting her alone, made her heart beat with heavy throbs, for it told her that he was as mad as she.

Could she resist making sure?

Some women were, perhaps, capable of resisting their heart's desire, but Nadia's longing for Wylber amounted to an obsession. If love was madness, then she believed she was gloriously mad. She ached for the feel of his arms about her, his kisses on her lips, and only they two somewhere alone where no eyes could see them, no ears hear their passionate joy in reunion.

Yet—he was married to Petal, and she, Nadia, was temporizing with sin!

He had taken Petal of his own free will—for that he should be punished. She would punish him if it tore the heart out of her breast. He should be made to feel that his choice was irrevocable. He, who had loved her so, had given that love to another! He did not deserve reunion.

Nevertheless, a force in her greater than conscience and the moral sense, sent her to the willows at the bottom of the garden, to lie in her hammock, screened

by the drooping boughs and luxurious ferns, to peep at the river and watch if it was true that Wylber came that way to look for the love he had lost.

Through a small opening in the screen of leaves she saw the ripples glittering in the sunlight, and river-craft plying to and fro. There were barges towed by launches; motor-boats hurrying along, the water curling back at their bows; punts drifting past on the tide, with their cheerful occupants, and gay parasols spread. The inevitable gramophone sounded a happy accompaniment of gaiety and inconsequence, which was youths' contribution to a bright summer's day.

All the morning she lay watching and waiting, and after lunching with her mother, she returned to her eager vigil, her ears tuned to the lap of an oar or the movement of reeds.

As all things come to those who know how to wait, at last the lip-lap of a boat being propelled in the shallows through rushes and reeds came up from the water, close to the shore. No one would pass so near unless with an object.

Nadia's pulses seemed to cease, her heart was in her throat. Raising her head, she listened.

Yes. Someone was pushing a boat along, hugging the shore. Presently, herself unseen, she saw that it was Wylber.

So this was what he did every day. How faithful to his determination to meet her! She had told him at the party that she often spent an afternoon in her nook with a novel and a thermos of tea.

He could have called with Petal, but that was not the way he wished to meet her again, for she had shown him how impersonal she could be, by intent. He wanted to see and speak to her alone, with the liberty to recall the past. Oh, she knew it, quite well! . . .

Would she make a sign?

She saw that he was beginning to fasten his boat to a tree-trunk which he reached, bending forward.

Then, he meant to satisfy himself whether or not she was there!

From the hammock in which she reclined she could also see the lawn and the house through the trees, and a gardener working at a distance among the rose bushes opposite. If she spoke, he would hear the tones of her voice.

Just for a moment, she was resentful of the presence of the gardener. It would have been so much more thrilling to have been isolated and alone. But that was impossible in her mother's garden, for the two gardeners knew what to expect if they neglected their duties. This one was young enough to keep an interested eye peeping in the direction of the willows, the moment he sensed a romance.

It was Fate, and Nadia felt a deep sense of relief, for she could still temporize with temptation, while clinging to safety. The force of her own passion for Wylber frightened her, for it seemed that the years had not weakened, but strengthened, longing for the man who had been the father of her luckless baby. To know that he was so near, paralysed her nerves and set her quivering from head to foot. Should she slip out and hide from him?

She was too late. Wylber was already parting the drooping branches and looking down on her with his sea-blue eyes glowing.

"Nadia!" he cried, in startled gladness as though he had been expecting again to be disappointed, and could scarcely believe the evidence of his eyes.

What magic gave Nadia the power to crush back her agitation, her pulsing emotions, and reply coolly:

"Hullo! Trespassing? Where did you come from?" The colour returned slowly to her cheeks as she rose to meet him, offering a beautiful hand. Nadia's hands had been photographed for women's journals, their perfection made the subject of scientific manicuring.

Wylber took her hand awkwardly, as if he did not quite know what to do with it. He would have preferred to take her in his arms, but there was that confounded gardener!

"I took a chance on finding you here," said he, then dropping his voice, "I have been taking that chance every day, and just because I am successful—you are not alone."

"I am, indeed," said she, wilfully misunderstanding him. "Do sit down," indicating a camp chair and seating herself on the edge of the hammock. "You see, you are my sole visitor."

"I was alluding to the gardener. Nadia—don't let's pretend. I have not been hanging round here for a week to talk platitudes with you." He leant forward with his elbows on his knees, his handsome face raised to hers, his eyes full of dog-like yearning.

"You are changed, Wylber—yet not very much," said she, critically, just beginning to notice points she had not dared to observe too narrowly at the garden party. "What have you done to your hair?"

He passed a hand over its smooth glossiness, in absent fashion, resenting the diversion.

"Nothing—why, what's the matter with it?"

Nadia laughed mischievously. "You have sacrificed the curls in order to be smart! I prefer it as before. Also—you are getting—fat. I regret to say so, but it's true."

"I haven't an ounce of fat," he returned, indignantly. "It's all muscle," which she already knew, "and what about it? It makes no difference to facts, does it? I am here, and you are there—do you realize what it means after all this time?"

"I do. I also realize that you are married. Why did you do it, Wylber?"

"God!" he pressed his fingers to his eyes. "Why does a man do idiotic things? Shall I tell you about myself?"

"I am ready to listen," said she, demurely, her eyes veiled by drooping lashes. It was exactly what she wished, to gain breathing time.

"It was like this—I cleared out of the country, feeling all kinds of a rotter. My father was dead, and I had come rudely to my senses, feeling that I should be dead too. The thought of what had happened because of my love for you—the fact that you were such a kid—oh, I felt an unspeakable cad, so I determined to cut it out there and then. Don't suppose that I did not suffer hell over it. Several times on the high seas, I would have put myself over, for two twos, only the thought of my mother, just widowed, held me back. It would have been a rotten, cowardly thing to do, anyway. So I landed on the other side and went all out for distraction. Gad! a fellow can get that, if he looks for it. My uncle was very decent to me—pulled me out of a scrape or two, because he understood that I was at sixes and sevens over my dad's death, so he imagined! It wasn't only that," Wylber said, tracing patterns in the dust at his feet with a twig which his idle fingers had picked up, and Nadia, peeping at his face, thought it the handsomest she had seen for its clear-cut features and golden-brown eyebrows that ran in two straight lines. The line of his cheek was no longer curved, as at eighteen, but long from cheekbone to jaw, the curve of which was gracious and beautiful. (He was too good-looking, thought she. His lips might have been a woman's!) "It was the feeling—the feeling of having taken advantage of a kid. Can you wonder that I could only be happy when trying to forget you?" He laughed defiantly. "Forget!—I never forgot. Then, I used to get letters from my people, and in it they gossiped, as people will, and it seemed, whenever they mentioned you, you were having a perfectly wonderful time, first in Italy, then in Paris. I believed that it would be umpteen years before I could ever ask you to marry

me, so I gave up the thought, believing that you would find someone great—they said your father had been raised to the peerage—and that you would scorn a poor devil like me, for I can never be a rich man as long as Uncle is above ground. He gives me an allowance and I work with him. So that was how things were, when Mother brought Petal over. Uncle got foolish about Petal. He seemed to think that she was an angel straight from heaven. Her childishness he called innocence and purity. I was made to see her through his eyes, and not being too terribly in love with anyone since losing you, I made up my mind to ask her to marry me. She is pretty enough to make a fellow think she could make up for everything else. That's how I came to marry her—now you know, and God help me!—I have seen you again." He buried his face in his hands for a moment, and was silent.

"You never knew," said Nadia slowly, in her soft, caressing voice, "that I had a baby in Paris?"

Up came Wylber's head with a jerk, and his eyes questioned her fiercely.

"Yes," she nodded, her eyes unable to bear the light in his. "It died at the time. I was desperately ill—don't know how I recovered. Had it not been for Jasper, I should have died. He took care of me, and no one knows to this day about it." She did not think it mattered if she did not mention her mother.

"Nadia!" breathlessly. "Oh, Nadia!—and I never knew! Poor little kid!" His voice broke as he transferred himself to the hammock and crushed her hands in his. "My God! to think that I never knew! Oh, why didn't you tell me?"

"I could not. You seemed to have dropped out altogether—I imagined that you had ceased to think of me."

"Don't, for God's sake, don't!" His arms opened to her, then fell to his side, for the gardener was coughing as a reminder of his presence.

"Go back and sit down," said Nadia, quietly. "As you said, I am not alone."

"But—I *must* see you alone, Nadia. I have been dreaming of it, working for it. Do you know where I went, not long ago? To Basingbrook, to peep at the paradise from which we were expelled by the death of my father. I went through the wood, and everything came back. Nadie! I—I sat in that dell all among the moss and leaves, and I howled like a babe, I did! And I am not ashamed, because I love you so!" He reached out a muscular hand, browned by outdoor life, and laid it over her own. "It amounts to this—I cannot live without you, Nadia. I've got to get you, some way."

"And Petal?" said she, her lips quivering.

"She'll have to divorce me. God!—I could not go back to her. She's not a wife—she's a doll. I have known, for some time, that life is impossible with her. She is not a woman—she is—oh, an angel, let us say. Uncle was right. Human men have no use for her sort. Think of me, loving you more than ever—mad for you—being a husband to Petal! Nadia—you and I were made for each other. You love me still—you *do!* Oh, darling, darling!" he whispered. "Send that fellow away on an errand, I long to kiss you, Nadia!"

And Nadia, sharing the longing for the meeting of lips, trembled and refused. It was too cold-blooded a thing to do, and savoured of calculation. She could never "help out" in ways like that—it went against the grain. How different men were! "You can be seen from the windows," was her excuse.

"Whose windows?" he asked. "Your mother's?"

"No—mine. And the one alongside is my dressing-room. A maid could so easily be there."

"I wonder you haven't had a visit from a cat-burglar. That dressing-room asks for it," said he. And he indicated the sloping roof of the bay below, which Nadia explained belonged to the library.

" See that drain-pipe going past it? Anyone with any pretensions to agility, could swarm up to that sloping roof by the ivy and the drain-pipe."

" Thank goodness they never do."

" What do you mean to do with me, Nadia? " said he, taking his attention from the question of cat-burglars, his eyes gazing yearningly into hers.

" Send you away, I suppose," said she, knowing that he would refuse to go.

" You couldn't do that—not now, when we love each other."

" I have not admitted that," she fenced.

" You don't need to. I read it in your face. We love each other, and nothing can stop our coming together. Memory has us fast—you have not forgotten——" and he whispered of the things she and he remembered, till the flame of his passion found its reflection in her, and gripping hands they relapsed into a pulsing silence. If she had thought Wylber tongue-tied and " raw," she took it back. He had plenty to say for her ear alone.

It was then that Nadia had a strange feeling of someone standing behind her. She even looked round nervously, for Petal's husband had no right to be holding her hands gripped hard in his. At the same time, Jasper's name again breathed through her mind.

If Jasper knew! . . .

She could almost see the look on Jasper's face of anxiety and fear for her. What was she doing?—where heading?

" Please go, Wylber," said she, unable to bear more. " Please go! "

" When shall I see you? Tell me, Nadie? I must see you soon." His tone was passionate and compelling.

Jasper! Jasper! If he were only here! If she could only run to him for refuge from herself. She was trying to shut out Wylber's sea-blue eyes of love and

yearning, with thoughts of Jasper's Christ-like patience and goodness towards her. He had maintained a miraculous faith in her in spite of her fall, and she was going to prove herself rotten to the core—for Petal was her friend.

"You must let me think!" She snatched her hands from his and buried her face in them.

"I am doing all the thinking for us both," said he, speaking in rapid earnest. "I shall go about a job immediately—there is one in India—commercial—that a Canadian firm will give me. You see, I thought of this. I knew, as sure as the sun was in the heavens, that you and I would have to chuck up everything and come together again, so I saw the directors. They are willing to take me on, and we could leave in a week. Nadia, darling—you and I, and the world well lost! When can I see you again? I cannot live till I have you in my arms—as before—— Oh, Nadia!"

"I cannot, Wylber. I cannot!" she moaned. There was Petal—and her proud parents—her mother whose god was convention and respectability. Now that it was all in her own hands, as she had known from the beginning it would be, she was afraid—for others!

For the blow it would be to Jasper who thought the world of her; who had wiped out the past and set her on her feet again, blameless in the sight of all people!

(Again, the feeling of Jasper with her, in spirit, as he had said he would always be!)

"I cannot go with you, Wylber. You lost the chance when you married Petal. Life never forgives."

"I see you are over-wrought. This has been too sudden—I am a brute to harass you. It's difficult for me to convince you with that damned gardener in sight," said Wylber, sullenly. "See, Nadie, don't trouble your dear little red head any more, only keep me close in your heart till I can find a way of coming again to you—and this time, you must be alone

Promise to love me greatly—to think of me ceaselessly, and to remember Basingbrook ! " How could she have thought him devoid of eloquence ?

" It's beyond my power to forget ! " broke involuntarily from her.

" Thank God for that ! " He stooped swiftly and kissed her hand, then rose. " Till I see you again, darling," he whispered. " It won't be long ! " after which he vanished round the screen of shrubs that overhung the water, and Nadia heard the soft lip-lap of the boat as it was pushed from the bank, then the steady dip of oars, till that, even, was lost in the sounds of the river.

II

She was accused of being dull and absent-minded at dinner, that evening, when her parents entertained a few guests of note, Mr. Disney among them. Never had she appeared at such ill advantage, and it was only because none of them was a stranger, that she did not forever impress them unfavourably.

" I hope you are not ill ? " Mr. Disney said at her elbow. " I have so wanted to ask you to dine somewhere with me—any day suitable to yourself. It could be anywhere you name."

" I am afraid I *am* ill," said Nadia, feeling very ill, indeed, in her mind, yet speaking lightly. " I hope it isn't catching, whatever it is, for it is terribly unfeeling to ask you to dinner, and give you a germ ! "

" I'd take anything from you and be grateful," he murmured, sentimentally.

" If I'm very bad, then, I'll send for you to hold my hand and cheer me up."

"I'll keep you to your word," said he.

"I should certainly take her at her word," said her father, teasingly, as he passed. "Nobody's looking." He had heard only the last sentence, and made Nadia laugh for the first time that evening.

She was terribly bored, for after Wylber's visit under the willows, everything else fell flat. She had no thoughts to spare for any other being, and was deaf to conversation. Glad, at last, to be released, she retired to bed, thankful for the oblivion of sleep, and tried her best not to think. Thinking was the way of madness, for do what she would, her thoughts were only of Wylber—his physical perfection, the appeal of his manhood, his passion, and the knowledge that they could never be anything but lovers—try as she may. With such memories between them, it was only playing with fire for them to pretend friendship.

Trying not to think, she was thinking all the harder.

How did women who loved as she loved, send a lover away for ever? How did they have the strength to do it? For her to gain that strength, she needed Jasper, and he was far away. If she wanted him, he would come even from the other end of the world. His bank would forward a telegram. But it was too late to call him now. She could not wait for weeks for him to come home from Africa. By that time, the issue would be settled for good and all. Either she would rise to superhuman heights for the sake of her obligations to others, or scatter those obligations to the winds and go with her boy. He had been her boy, and was hers still.

The idea of going with him to India, was so infinitely alluring, that she played with it, and gradually drifted into dreams; for the darkness and quiet were encouraging, the starlight in the window softly soothing.

Some time later, she was dreaming of Basingbrook, almost consciously dreaming, for Wylber's kisses on her

lips were very sweet, his arms round her marvellously realistic.

"Wake, darling—kiss me," his voice whispered, breathless with emotion, and the realism of his caresses banished all dreams and doubts.

"Wylber?" She was dazed and incapable of resistance.

"Yes, my own—my beautiful! I am the cat-burglar to-night, come to steal what is mine!—isn't that so? Speak, sweetest!"

He had come! . . .

Into the mists of sleep, she knew he had come, merging dreams into reality; finding her at her weakest most loving moment, when her mind was drugged by emotion, and desire was in possession of her soul—desire for a lover's kisses; desire for a lover's arms. . . . The oneness of love!

How could she have sent him away? was what she asked herself next day.

III

Never a thought for Petal while he was with her, nor what was to come—danger to herself—the pains and penalties of sin.

Sin?

Of course it was sin!

This time, it was nothing less. She had played with fire and was burned. She was sinning and debased.

In the morning, while the sun bathed the carpet through the open window and the glare in her room seemed to light up the innermost recesses of her soul, she reviewed what had happened, and knew herself lost.

Jasper would have no use for her now. She could

never lie to him, and he would feel how terribly he had wasted his hopes on her, how needlessly he had sacrificed himself!

She was really bad. No one but a bad girl could have done such a thing as rob a friend. While she lived, Petal would never get her husband back.

The memories of that night would make a wall between them that nothing but death could tear down. Wylber now knew his true mate, and there was no going back.

When the first grey streaks of dawn had entered the room and he had prepared to leave her, he had said:

"From now, henceforth and forever—you are *mine*. Come weal or woe. I shall make my preparations quickly—secretly, so that no one shall hinder us. I could not face life without you, my Nadia! That's that."

Her kisses, warm and clinging, were her reply. She could make none in words, for there was nothing left for her to do but to go with him when he was ready, and yet at her heart was only pain.

The pain increased in the daylight when she knew how it would be. While Wylber made his arrangements, she would not be able to keep him out of that room in the long dark hours. He had found his way there and would come again. She would not hinder him, for she wanted him to.

"Oh, God!" she groaned, "what have I become!"

And Jasper had said it would never happen again! So much for his faith in her!

It had happened again, and the old episode of Basingbrook was eclipsed. The old love was as a breath of perfume compared to this new knowledge of love's mysteries. They were no longer boy and girl, but man and woman, and their passion lost nothing by comprehension. By comparison, it was of a lower order, but none the less enslaving, and Nadia felt appalled when she saw to what she, Nadia Donithorne, had descended.

To think that she could calmly contemplate admitting Petal's husband to her room again and again, till such time as they could go away together, revealed the depths to which she had fallen.

But she was hypnotized, and had no wish to stay her downward course. The future could take care of itself —her parents would have to make the best of the storm of scandal there would presently be.

CHAPTER XII

THE FARM

I

THE speaking likeness of Jasper Noble which Nadia had preserved in secret to give her courage through the years, was brought forth that morning and again placed on her dressing-table that she might, by silent communion with it, take comfort and hope. He had a wonderful understanding, and perhaps, if he knew all, he would not condemn her. There were some things that could not be resisted, such as this love begun so long ago, which refused to die.

She sat before the picture as before a shrine, with hands clasped, pleading for a merciful judgment. He, so strong and good, would pity her weakness. If only he were in London, she would go to him now, and tell him all. She needed to tell him all!

Oh, but this would hurt him so! He had trusted and believed in her, and she had failed to justify his faith. "I tried, oh, so hard! I did not plan—it was no vulgar intrigue. Never, never! But if I do not go away with him, it will become that—a shameful intrigue—and I would rather die than live like that. Yet, I cannot give him up—he is mine—was mine in the beginning, and his marriage to Petal was a cruel mistake. Jasper! If you were only here!"

Jasper's eyes held a wonderful message for her of

enduring patience and forgiveness. His love was greater than human, though it was human enough, and his life was a beautiful example of unselfishness and sacrifice. While with him, she had had the impulse to be good. Had he stayed, she might now have been safe—strengthened by his goodness to resist temptation.

But all he had said and all he had done had come to naught!

Wylber was her lover; and life was Wylber.

Then something happened that was the cause of the worst quarrel between mother and daughter they had known.

Lady Donithorne entered, following an impatient and perfunctory knock, to make a final appeal to her child on behalf of Mr. Disney, who had tried to enlist her partisanship, and saw the photograph of Jasper on the dressing-table, with Nadia seated before it, worshipfully. The matter of Mr. Disney was instantly set aside that she might deal with this flagrant act of disobedience. Had she not made the banishment of Jasper one of her conditions that she would refrain from punishing Nadia as she deserved? They had purchased her forgiveness and generosity with the promise that there would be no sort of memory preserved of Nadia's association with Jasper, the man she believed had been accountable for her child's demoralization. Was this the reason why she persisted in refusing to marry?

"Nadia!" Her tone was indescribable. "You are guilty of treachery to me. That man's portrait in your room after all that has been? Have you no sense of honour left?"

"Oh, I know you said that—and—and——" Nadia, taken aback, did not know how to excuse herself. "Isn't it arbitrary? For you are not just to Jasper. I have long wanted to say so, but the subject has been taboo, and as he seemed to think you had the right to dictate terms—which I suppose you had, still, when you think of it, he has not deserved——"

That was enough for Lady Donithorne. Though the subject was taboo, she almost screamed with hysterical rage at Nadia's audacity.

"'Deserved'! Are you mad? What doesn't he deserve for his treachery to us who trusted him?"

"Treachery is never the word to apply to Jasper!" cried Nadia, in her beloved Jasper's defence. "It was not his fault. It was more his mother's fault for throwing us together."

"What do you mean? You might blame us next for throwing you with Jasper! How could an old lady like Mrs. Noble be held accountable for her son's wickedness?"

"I don't understand what you are saying. How was Jasper wicked? He was not wicked to marry me when no man in a thousand would have given me the protection of his name under the circumstances."

"He was in honour bound to do so. I think you are crazy. You are insolent to me to contend the matter. I know what I am talking about."

"I don't at all. I only see cause for you to be thankful for his readiness to sacrifice himself. If the child had lived it would not have had to be fatherless."

"Good heavens, Nadia! When he was bad enough to lead you astray——"

"Who are we talking about?"

"Jasper Noble."

"Jasper? *Jasper?* He never led me astray. What are you thinking of, Mother?"

"Jasper didn't? I think you have lost your senses. Who did, pray?"

"Did Jasper tell you that he was responsible for what happened to me?"

"What then? If he didn't in so many words, it was inferred by his having married you, and he did not deny it!—how could he?"

"He felt himself responsible because it happened while I was in his care. Oh, how unjust you have been

to him! I never knew he took that burden on himself to save me from your anger and condemnation. He thought, dear fellow! that by diverting your anger to himself, you would think it was all his doing!—oh, the crime of it! Mother, Jasper is innocent of all blame. It was not his doing. He was always careful of me. But his mother introduced a boy to me—long ago when we were very little children, and that time you left me to Jasper's guardianship, she sent for the boy to amuse me. I was dull and lonely, so he and I—oh, we saw too much of each other, and—and—it happened."

"Who was that boy?" gasped Lady Donithorne, dropping into a chair.

"What is the use of asking me now?"

"I insist." Lady Donithorne's face meant determination.

"Well—if you must know—it was Wylber Young."

"Nadia!—oh, my God! He is Petal's husband now—and you asked him to this house!" She could hardly take in the terrible injustice done Jasper, with this new danger cropped up.

"Yes."

"Why?—why? Are you lost to all sense of decency?"

"I dunno. I s'pose I am. I am beginning to think that, myself."

"Don't answer me defiantly! What was your object in bringing him here? I now remember how he hung about you all the time!"

"I thought I would get the meeting over. Petal intended to call with him, anyway; only, was too much taken up with herself."

"And do you mean to see him again? Have you so little good feeling and moral sense as to allow that young man to come to your house when there has been *that* between you? What am I to think of my own daughter? Indeed, I see, now, that I have been most unjust to Jasper. He was too good to have married

you after your misconduct with Wylber Young. But Jasper was always a little crazy. It was like him, for he had a wish to enter the Church, only his father wanted him to mind the farm. However, he is not altogether blameless; his mother, too, for giving you all that licence to come to grief as you did. I look back and think what a mercy no one knew! At least, I owe that to Jasper. If I can get his address, I will write to him. What would he say if he knew that you were aiming to come between Petal and her husband? It is dreadful—dreadful!"

"I can give you Jasper's address. You owe it to him, Mother, to write and tell him that you know now how wonderful he was to me."

"I require your promise, Nadia, not to have anything to do with Wylber Young. It is indecent! But, it seems my daughter has no sense of decency, no self-respect, no honour! To think that you, at fifteen, should have had such evil instincts as to allow a boy to take advantage of you. It is inconceivable!"

"I don't think he was so much to blame—or I, either," said Nadia, calmly. "You must be just, Mother, and go back a little farther to the time when you gave me to Dr. Mary Payne to instruct on the things girls ought to know. She did it so thoroughly, that I did not only know things, but the whole attitude of my mind changed. I remember that it was all at a time when I was just an ill-balanced kid, and utterly without self-control. I was sensitive and had no sense of proportion. Sex matters got on my brain. I had no perspective, and was ripe to fall in love, terribly, romantically, with the first person that came along. If Jasper had been a bad man, I should have been very easy prey. But he was pure and honourable—to think how you have treated him! He had no thought in his mind but what was for my good. Then came Wylber on the brink of Cambridge and a career, and he was like a young god to me. You can fancy the rest, for

we had unlimited companionship. Mrs. Noble thought highly of him, forgetting that, though he was a splendid boy, he was, before everything, human, and also at an age when he, too, had very little sense of proportion or self-control. Two young things like us, let loose to play about, made the discovery that the most wonderful thing in Life was love—and the rest simply happened. Looking back, I have come to the conclusion that the one to be blamed most of all, is—yourself."

"How dare you!" cried Lady Donithorne, furious. "You ungrateful girl! You prurient-minded creature! I refuse to regard you as my daughter—no child of mine could have a character like yours. And you would blame *me*, who have borne so much on your account! You are just what the world would call a *bad* girl—*thoroughly bad*. Since, however, it is not of any use to blazon to the world the truth about you, I shall require you to promise that Wylber Young shall never be received by you again. Tell him what you like; but I refuse to have him here. The fact is, you are not to be trusted to renew that acquaintance."

Nadia, knowing how very true were her words, turned her head aside and did not defend herself.

"Will you promise?" Lady Donithorne persisted.

"I can promise not to *invite* him to this house, but I will probably meet him outside." (On both occasions of his visits to her alone he had come uninvited!) "I have no reason for cutting Petal, so it will be difficult to cut her husband."

"What are your intentions with regard to this Wylber Young? Do you mean to allow him to follow you around in the hopes of restoring old relations? For if that is your idea, let me say at once, that as long as you live with your parents and expect their countenance, it cannot be permitted. We do not wish a scandal, and you must consider our feelings. Your father, as you know, has been told nothing, but I shall be compelled to speak to him, if you are so lost to all

reason and good feeling as to come between husband and wife and create a wicked scandal. My God, Nadia! I would rather have seen you dead in your childhood than grow up the immoral character you are."

"Am I immoral?" said Nadia, as if that aspect of the case had never yet struck her. It was a dreadful word—suggesting loose living and free love. She could never be immoral in that sense. She was faithful to Wylber, and would be so to the end of her days, because she loved him—had loved him from the first. "I don't know what I am," she sighed. "All I know is that you parted me from Bruno, and if he had been here, nothing would have happened. He took such wonderful care of me after he rescued me from social damnation. Now, nothing seems to matter."

"Give me his address," said Lady Donithorne. "I shall implore him to come back at once. I shall send him a cable. To think that I should have maligned him to his own mother! God forgive you, Nadia. I cannot!"

When she had copied down the address of Jasper's bank, she left the room, looking years older for the hour she had spent with her child.

II

"Maligned him to his own mother!"

Nadia realized what that meant after her mother had left the room, and she was dismayed. Had Jasper allowed his mother, also, to think evil of him that he might save his Nadikins from blame and condemnation? He, no longer a boy, pledged to protect his ward who was little more than a child, was being held responsible by his mother for her ruin; while she,

because of her tender age, was excused and forgiven! Had he told the truth, there would be no clemency for her, and her conduct be called "natural depravity."

Oh, Jasper, Jasper!

It seemed to Nadia that the only thing she could now do would be to search out Mrs. Noble and tell her what she had told her own mother. Let her know that her son was the most self-sacrificing and righteous man God had ever created.

She dressed feverishly, and taking out her car, went to town to call at the bank with which the Nobles had always dealt, to try to discover Mrs. Noble's address. Banks usually offered to forward letters, not give addresses away. But it was the only thing she could do.

Seated in her luxurious car with her hands on the wheel, Nadia felt living in a dream-world. Everything seemed unreal. It was difficult to realize that she had spent the night with Wylber—it was inconceivable that such a thing could have happened in her parents' dignified house, where everything was so correct and respectable. Yet inconceivable things happened, of which society was ignorant forever.

In the broad light of day, she was bound to confess to her soul, that hers was not unadulterated happiness. There was too much of degradation in what had happened for her to feel that love like hers and Wylber's was justified. In her secret heart was the burden of conscious wrongdoing, and the knowledge of injury to others that must for ever make happiness impossible. It was like a canker in the heart of a rose which in time would destroy its beauty and perfume.

This came as a solid conviction while driving through London.

While waiting at the crossing at Hyde Park Corner, her face in repose looking the sorrowful reflection of her thoughts, she heard her name called in startled accents from the pavement close at hand, and the voice gave her a leap of the heart.

Swinging round, she looked full into Jasper's eyes. Jasper! It was unbelievable.

Yet, there was no mistake.

"Nadia!—oh, this is luck!" said Jasper. "I have been wondering how I could see you."

"Bruno!" The old name came naturally, and her voice had an hysterical note of pitiful appeal.

"You are alone. May I come in with you for a little while?"

"Of course!—oh, it is wonderful to see you again!" She made space by shifting a rug, and Jasper got in beside her.

As they moved on, he told her that he had just arrived in London—practically, just—for he had been with his mother only a week—came over on a wonderful quest! Would she like to know what? He had heard that the owners of Basingbrook Farm were going to sell the property, as two deaths and heavy duties had made it impossible to carry on. It had not brought them good luck, and as Jasper had managed to make a little money by a successful speculation in Pretoria, he thought that he might manage to raise enough money on mortgage to buy back the farm. Of course, he would have to go desperately slow and live on next to nothing in order to stock it as it used to be stocked.

"I ran down to look at the old place, and it brought a lump to my throat when I thought that it might yet be mine again. Now don't make me talk of myself when I want to know all about you," said he, his kind eyes resting affectionately on her small, flower-like face. "You are looking so grown-up, I shall have to grow accustomed to the new Nadia! Does she mind the old pet names?"

"Oh, Bruno! as if I could put up with anything else! It is so exciting to think you are back again. You must come to the house—Mother will welcome you with both arms."

"How's that? She exacted——"

"She'll exact nothing any more. We had a straight talk, only this morning—funny, isn't it? not knowing you were in England—and I found out, for the first time, the full extent of all you did for me! Was it necessary, Bruno?"

"You mean——"

"Yes. It breaks my heart to think that you should have turned such old friends against you for my sake! All this time, the subject was never broached as it was banned, but to-day—there was a bit of a quarrel, for Mother and I don't quite hit it off—my fault, I suppose—anyway, the truth had to come out—I could not bear that she should despise you unjustly." Nadia could not bring herself to mention Wylber's name, for it seemed too late to do any good.

"Oh, well—the need for the lie has passed. She can't now hold the old story against you."

"If she does, it won't matter," said Nadia, thinking of how much more there was going to be against her, presently, and how much she deserved all the reproach and contumely that had been hurled at her.

She drove slowly through the Park while they talked, and she supplied him with news of her affairs which he had hankered for and had never been able to obtain. What had she done all this time? What hadn't she done! The chief ground of trouble between herself and her mother was that she refused to marry. "I shall never marry, never. Only Mother hasn't the fine feeling to appreciate my reason. I have wanted so to talk to you, Bruno! and now you are here, all I want to say hangs fire. I don't think I shall ever have the courage to confide in you as before." That was how she felt, for there was an indefinable change in herself she could only feel, but not explain. He was the same, unchanged, dear fellow, eager to stand by her through stress and strife, but the two years felt to her like ten. She was no longer as she had imagined, the little girl

who had clung to him for protection. If he offered her protection now, she would have no use for it. A species of madness was in her blood while her heart sang: "Wylber is here! I have only to wish it, and he will come to me." How, while obsessed with thoughts of Wylber, could she turn to Jasper for counsel?

He could not help her any more.

What would he think of her if he knew about—last night?

"It hurts to hear you say that," said Jasper. "We must get somewhere and thresh this out. Don't you know that I love you just the same?—more, if that were possible?" he said, earnestly. It was a great handicap that he could not lay his hands on her shoulders and insist on reading her beautiful eyes. How beautiful they were, he was telling himself every moment they flashed soft messages of affection at him. They had met after so long, only with a handshake and conventional conversation, when there was so much that might have been possible elsewhere. "I have been far away, but there has never been a single day in which I have not dreamed and communed with you. Your miniature has lived with me within the cover of my watch. I have thought of you, blessed you, prayed for you, Nadia."

"Oh, Bruno! I am not worth praying for!" said she, with a break in her voice. "In the face of real temptation, I am as weak as water. There is a giant within me that lifts me up and carries me away against my better judgment, and I do things I know are dead wrong. That's me. I believe, had you been here to take care of me, I might have been something worth while, but—it's too late. I can't go back to what I was the day we parted. I am a monster of selfishness and cruelty, now, Bruno. You'll have to wash your hands of me."

"Never. I don't believe a word of what you have

said against yourself. I refuse to believe that the nature I knew and loved could atrophy and die. It was capable of great strength and beauty, and by now has developed grandly. I am only waiting to see it blossom forth."

There were tears in Nadia's eyes as they turned piteously to his, only to see a perfect faith and trust in her that seared her heart.

How had it blossomed forth? . . .

"Come and see us, Jasper," said she, anxious to escape from the pain of self-conviction. "Dad was asking about you only the other day and wondering why you never wrote." She obtained his mother's address, and after parting with him at the door of his solicitors, she called on Mrs. Noble at the boarding-house in Bayswater, and asked to see her alone.

Mrs. Noble, who had not seen Nadia since they parted at Milan long ago, was agitated at the thought of an interview with her, for she had looked upon the girl as the cause of Jasper's fall from rectitude and virtue. Though she had tried to bury the evil past, she had never been truly happy about her son, for he had fallen in her proud estimation of him, and the blow was unforgettable. To hear, now, that Nadia had called to see her, she was convinced the whole mischief would begin again. Jasper was back from Africa, and the girl had lost no time in discovering him.

"I did not expect ever to see you again, Nadia," said she, coldly, refusing to shake hands and not offering her a chair. "There is too much of sadness and pain I owe to you for me to wish to speak to you. Oh, my Jasper! Girls like you——"

"I know," said Nadia, looking about her in the musty, ill-ventilated room, to see if they were quite alone, "but that was all a mistake. I have only just heard from my mother the sort of delusion she was labouring under, and have put her right. She put you

wrong, so I have called that no time be lost in telling you the truth. I hate to think, Mrs. Noble, that you should have believed a word against your son. He did not deserve that!"

"He did not deny it!—but, what are you wishing to say? Tell me, quickly."

She listened in grave astonishment to Nadia's exoneration of Jasper, and broke down, weeping, when she realized the injustice he had suffered even at her hands.

"Is this true? Thank God! thank God!—but how came it that you, such a child, could have deceived us so? Who was the man?—Hammond?" She could only think of Hammond, whom she had never liked or encouraged as a friend, as he was not, in the finest sense, a gentleman.

Nadia hesitated, then saw no reason why she should withhold the truth, since all the world would presently know it.

"It was Wylber. You brought us together and gave us unlimited freedom to amuse ourselves. After all, boys and girls who haven't learned self-control are like young animals, and Nature has a good deal to say to them."

"Wylber!" Mrs. Noble sank into a chair. The boy she had admired and trusted? What was the matter with life that these things should happen? "Oh, Nadia—how terribly I have been to blame!"

It was refreshing to find someone willing to take the blame!

"I should have taken greater care. I had too great a belief in human nature. I never thought Wylber would have been like that!"

"He wasn't extraordinary. You see, we fell terribly in love, and when that happens, anything may follow at that age. And why not, when it follows at any age? Why expect more from children—like we were—who never think deeply, but feel just as deeply as grown-ups?

We wanted more looking after than men and women out in the world who fill the newspapers with tragedies by falling in love with the wrong people. I have never been able to understand why nobody realizes that Nature is like a runaway horse which has to be ridden on the curb from the earliest years, or it is bound to come to ruin. You can't blindfold it, for that is worst of all; but you have to govern it."

"Jasper is in England," said Mrs. Noble, not wishing to enter into a discussion of sex. The main thing was that she knew, now, the real state of the case, and was longing to fling her arms round her son's neck and tell him of her relief and joy, and to ask his forgiveness.

"Yes, I met him. He is just the same, dear old Jasper."

"Getting grey about the temples—too soon for thirty-four, otherwise, he is unchanged. Did he tell you that he is trying to get a mortgage on Basingbrook Farm to enable him to buy it?"

"Yes. I am so glad for his sake that he will again own the dear place."

"My dear, he'll break his heart, for it will be no use to him!—he hasn't enough money to start with. The farm needs too much to be done to it—restocking and repairs everywhere, so I happen to know that he is going to be advised by an expert to give up the idea. He will only drop the little he has. It will break *my* heart, I know, to let him go back, for I am getting old, and my health is not as good as it was. Oh, how hard life is for those who have no money!"

"Life is very hard, I know," said Nadia, into whose brain an inspiration was born. The need to go back and think about it, made her hurry away a moment later, feeling very glad she had called to relieve the mind of the old lady.

Mrs. Noble kissed her at parting, saying: "Far be it from me, Nadia dear, to cast a stone. You are now

older and have a wider understanding of life, and having put the past behind you, can go forward a wiser and better girl."

In the car on her homeward way, Nadia was repeating the last of the sentence over and over—"A wiser and a better girl!" How had she justified that hope? It seemed to Nadia that she was in the world only to bring trouble on others.

Before she committed her final act of treachery and selfishness, she determined, there and then, that she would, at least, do something good for Jasper, to whom she owed much. He would not be able to refuse a gift from his erring and affectionate Nadia.

The impulse to strike while the iron was hot, made her change her direction. She would not go home yet; so she telephoned to her mother saying that she had found she had business with her lawyers and would not be in till late in the afternoon.

"One moment, Nadia!" called her mother into the receiver, in accents that sounded stern. "Can you, truthfully, say you are not with Wylber Young?"

"Very truthfully. I have not seen him since I left home."

"I should like to believe you, but I seem to have lost all faith in you. I am trembling lest you will, some day, do something that will disgrace us. Oh, Nadia!"

"Mother—don't write to Jasper. He's in London. I came upon him by accident, just come home from Africa."

"Indeed! I hope you told him to call."

"I did."

"We shall be glad to see him. Oh, Nadia!" just as she was about to hang up the receiver, "there have been telephone calls for you. One after you left, and the other a moment ago. The same voice—a man. He would not leave a message, which was strange, as they all do." She sounded anxious.

" It couldn't have been very important," said Nadia.

Silence, but for a sound that indicated that the receiver had been hung up and the conversation cut off.

III

Nadia warmed over her project till it filled her mind. pushing everything else into the background, even the fact that Wylber must have been trying to get her on the telephone. He *would* try! Oh, but she would not let herself think of him and last night, for, alongside of Jasper and his high standards, Wylber and last night brought the blood in a crimson flow of shame to her face.

Poor Jasper, struggling to get back to the farm and thwarted by the lack of money! She, however, had more than was good for her. She could not use it all on herself, and the sums that went to different charities were not felt.

For once in her life she was going to do, really, a good act, and the power to do it gave her such a glow of inward happiness that she felt like walking on air. Even the greyness of London's buildings looked cheerful, and the sun had a golden light. Thinking of Jasper again master of Basingbrook, made her heart leap, and laughter twinkle in her eyes. What would he say? What would he do?

" Nadia—you did this for me? " She could see his dear face all broken with emotion—as, long ago, when they had said good-bye.

" Yes, Bruno. It is the happiness of my life to do this for you who deserve the best in life! "

He couldn't refuse to take what was a *gift*, however much the obligation entailed went against the grain. It was such a colossal gift, so unprecedented from a girl to a man! Oh, the pleasure of it—the satisfaction! It was the only way she could repay him.

On the way to her lawyers, she wondered what the secret of true happiness was, for she already knew that Wylber with all his passionate love could not give her the real thing, if she went to him at such heavy cost to others.

It was even dawning on her that moments of great rapture could be succeeded by self-reproach and pain so great that it might destroy all hope of happiness.

She did not want to think like this. It was far pleasanter to think of Wylber's demonstrations of love and the joy of living together always, but psycho-analysis was becoming a habit with her, and since looking on Jasper's face and hearing his voice, the feeling of self-contempt was gaining ground. She was feeling that she was not worthy to be loved so unselfishly as Jasper loved her. To know all he expected of her, made her cheek tingle with shame.

At one time, she could tell him everything; and that was when her mind was pure, in spite of her fall from grace. She could not say that her mind was now pure, for she had allowed Wylber to be false to his marriage vows, and was planning to rob his wife and bring disgrace on her people for the gratification of lustful desires.

That was all it amounted to. They loved each other?

Oh, yes, they loved each other in a very carnal way, and it was not impossible that they would, in course of time, hate each other, when they came to their senses and, in cold blood, reviewed the damage they had done.

Nadia put away all unpleasant thoughts when she entered the office of her lawyers, for this new-found happiness of giving, and helping for good, was some-

thing she wanted to enjoy unadulterated with self-reproach and shame.

She knew very little about business matters and did not wish to be troubled with pros and cons. The farm called Basingbrook, after the little town of that name, was again for sale, and she was determined to buy it without revealing her name—any name would do. It was to be managed secretly for her, because, the moment it was taken over, a deed of gift (she had heard of such legal phraseology) would be made out in favour of Jasper Noble.

But, before he was informed of the fact, the farm would have to be restocked and buildings repaired—they could take expert advice on the point. Everything was to be made clear of all encumbrances, no debts of any kind or dues unpaid. After which, Jasper Noble would be told that the farm was waiting for the owner to enter and take possession.

Had she any idea of the expense she was incurring? legal heads warned her. Farms were not bought for a song, she was reminded in grave disapproval. People did not fling money about in that generous fashion in these days. Had she her parents' approval?

Nadia did not need or desire her parents' approval, as she was a free agent and the money was hers unconditionally. She could give the whole away, if she liked, to charities. But she was not proposing to give the whole away, only a portion of it. She had heard what Jasper had sold the farm for, and was not speaking without knowledge.

Oh, well, she could certainly do as she pleased, nevertheless it was a quixotic thing she was doing. Unheard of! More shaking of wise heads.

More's the pity, Nadia remarked, for people with heaps of money never understood how happy they might make others if they were a little quixotic sometimes. She quarrelled a little with her lawyers, then made friends, after winning their whole-hearted co-

operation. " And let it be done as quickly as possible, as there is no time to lose. He'll be going back to Africa if you don't make haste."

" If the other side is ready to sell and the deeds are all right, it will be only a matter of a few weeks."

It seemed a lifetime, but Nadia was forced to be content.

CHAPTER XIII

THE STUMBLING BLOCK

I

IN the weeks that passed, Nadia was a problem to herself, for she wanted nothing in the world so much as to do what Wylber suggested, yet dared not take the fateful step. The habit of considering others is not easy to cast aside. He was ready to take her away and leave England immediately, but she temporized. Nor would she permit him to repeat his burglarious visit; nor meet him at the places he named, as scheming and intriguing were anathema to her.

Wylber, maddened by hope-deferred and passionate yearnings, wasted his days haunting the willows by the river for a chance to force a decision.

One day he caught her on the road in her car, by sheer luck, for he was not expecting to meet her in the heart of the West End, and he made the most of his case. She was held up by the traffic, and he was crossing the road. Naturally, she gave him a seat beside her for he looked so tragic, and they moved on together while she listened to his flow of eloquence.

"You can't have any idea what you are doing to me," said he. "Let's have the truth, and put an end to suspense. You have discovered that you are fed up and mean to marry some one of the fellows chasing after you."

"Wylber! How little you understand!"

" Don't you love me at all? " devouring her profile with hungry eyes while all the world was welcome to look on.

" You know that I love you. But it isn't a happy state of things."

" Not for me, with you doing this elusive stunt and driving me crazy. Why are you doing it? "

" Because I hate all underhand things. I'd sooner wait and go off with you, for it would be honest, whatever else it isn't. A mighty blow dealt those you care for, straight between the eyes, is preferable to a stab in the back."

" Well—let's strike the blow, then. I'm ready. I have that job for the asking, how long can I make them wait? "

" I said I'd let you know, positively, one way or the other, when my business deal is through."

" Is it of such importance? "

" Vital importance."

(It certainly was, for she had heard from Jasper of the date booked for his return to Africa. He had called at Auburndale, and was often there to convince himself that his Nadikins had outgrown all need of him. That being the case, England had nothing to give him since the farm, also, was beyond his reach.

Nadia had been hurrying matters through, thrilled to think of the day coming so soon that would prove to him how much she still loved him, though not in the way that would have pleased him most. She had had to turn her face aside when he spoke so bravely of his disappointment with regard to the purchase of the farm, as someone else had stepped in with an offer greater than he had been prepared to give. Poor Jasper! If he had only known that the " someone " was herself!)

" You don't tell me anything—you never even write! " Wylber complained in the car.

" Letters are dangerous things. A clever cynic once said: ' Never write, and never burn.' Just think

what a lot of unhealthy interest in divorce suits would be saved if people followed such a precept—or how much evidence preserved against rogues!"

"Don't, Nadia! You are flippant! I'm infernally jealous of Jasper Noble."

Nadia laughed reassuringly. "Silly boy! I am very fond of Jasper—but not in that way. He's the only person that makes me believe in God, for he is wonderful. I have said my prayers to Jasper. Had he not gone to Africa, I should perhaps have learned to keep my human impulses in order."

"I am glad he went away. Oh, Nadia! can you swear that your feelings for me are unchanged?" His manner, the look in his eyes, told the world, in passing, of his adoration.

"Yes, I can, Wylber; but it doesn't make me any happier. I feel such a cur to—to Petal—and others. They think me so different. It's that, that does for me. Somehow, I can't feel that you and I are the same people of Basingbrook—long ago. Then, we did not seem to have to think of others. It was all so idyllic. Just natural, to love—like that. But now, we are injuring others right and left. Taking happiness at the expense of others—sowing grief broadcast!—and that makes me afraid. We have no right!—no right!"

"Nadia—don't. You are beginning to be pessimistic, and I am so frightened that you are drifting away from me. I don't care whom I injure—what happens to anyone, so long as I get you. I wish to God I could make you feel the same."

"I can't. That's the trouble. Ever since you were with me that night, I have been feeling—how can I describe it?—a lost soul. Damned for ever. You see, though I did not tell you to come, I *let* you love me. I did that, and paved the way to other things. I might not have felt so bad about it, but I—I met Jasper, who thinks the world of me, and that made me realize how low I have fallen."

" Oh, Nadie ! I cannot bear to hear you say that ! "

" There is no getting around it, Wylber. One doesn't do things like that, and feel proud of oneself. We are either weak, or we are strong. It's quite true that the world has no use for weak characters—they do a terrible lot of harm. You and I are weak—weak as water, for we haven't the strength to deny ourselves—we just take what we want ! "

" And I glory in it. If that is being weak, it's adorable. I'd rather not be ' strong,' for it's dull work having to deny oneself of the only pleasure life holds. I'd go to pieces without you, Nadia."

" Oh, no. You think so ! " she replied, brokenly. " People always think they can't stand things till put to the test, and then they manage to find new interests, and buck up again. Life proves it every day. You've only to look about you. I often find that those who think they are going to be happy doing what hurts others badly, don't succeed. Inevitably, the knowledge of their own selfishness kills happiness. The axe is laid at the root of the tree the moment they lose their self-respect and are dishonourable. How can people be happy if they know they are acting dishonourably ? "

" It would make me as happy as a king, anyway, if I could have you with me always, Nadia. Why are you so pessimistic, these days ? "

" I dunno. It comes on me in waves."

" Darling !—give me the chance of a long, private talk with you where we cannot be disturbed, and I'd soon make you forget all this psycho-analysis stunt that is breaking your nerve. I love you so, and I don't get a dog's chance of telling you so ! It's just sending me to pieces, all this uncertainty. Let us meet somewhere, Nadia."

" When I go away with you, you will have too much of me. Have patience till then."

" Oh, darling ! that word ' when ' gives me new heart ! "

After that, he consented to leave her at a convenient corner, and allow her to proceed to her lawyers, shaken and trembling with renewed desire for demonstrations of the love he professed. Sooner or later, she would, in her weakness, take the plunge, for life, shorn of the rapture of mutual love, would be an empty thing.

II

On a depressing day in September, when the rain dripped incessantly, making pools on the carriage drive and turning the river into misty desolation, a taxi drew up under the porch of Auburndale House, on the Thames, and a slim female figure emerged, looking white and scared.

Dismissing the conveyance, she rang the door-bell and asked for Miss Nadia Donithorne. Soon afterwards, Nadia was greeting Petal in the drawing-room, wondering what extraordinary upheaval had brought the timid Petal out in such inclement weather. Judging by her drowned eyes and distracted appearance, there was surely something very special the matter. At no time careful of her looks, being conceited enough to believe that her beauty was independent of attention, she was on this occasion untidy, with locks out of place and a shiny nose.

Nadia felt guilty of having neglected Petal of late. As it was not easy to meet her in the old way, she had preferred avoiding all chance of meetings. It meant descending to the level of Judas Iscariot to kiss one whom she was deliberately betraying, and that was impossible to her. She could only see such conduct equalled by a wife behaving affectionately towards her

husband while carrying on an intrigue with his friend —or of Monsieur Dufour presenting his wife with a diamond brooch after spending the week-end with his mistress.

On this occasion, neither kissed, Petal being in a flood of tears at the sight of Nadia's face.

"Oh, I am so miserable! It isn't right that I should be made so miserable! What have I done that Wyl should turn against me? He hates me, I know, for he never comes near me now! Oh, Nadia! You know everything, tell me what to do!" She fell into a chair and sobbed in her hands. "You will think me a fool for behaving like this," she went on, raising a tear-drowned face to hers, "but it has become more than I can bear. At first, I did not know what it meant, his being away so much. I thought it natural, for men like the society of other men, and I felt that I bored him with talk about the baby's clothes and all. Then, I noticed that he doesn't eat much and looks queer. After that, he took to sleeping in another room. One night he never came home at all, and his mother got angry with him, saying that it was not the way to treat me. Wyl is so changed, that he was rude to his mother. A thing he has never been in his life. So I told him that I was sure he did not love me any more, and Nadia, he said it was true!" Petal wept as though her heart would break. "The things he said to me! He said I had no soul, and that men wanted more in their wives than mere prettiness. He wanted a 'human woman in his arms, not a doll.' Oh, Nadia! I asked him if he had gone and fallen in love with someone else—because, you told me, you remember, that by my repulsing him, he would. And Wyl was, oh, so cruel! He said it was perfectly true! I'll tell you what he said—'She's everything I want in the world—the most wonderful mate a man could desire. The most adorable of women! You may as well know the truth, for I love her! I have always loved her!'

I think he must have gone clean crazy in his temper to say this, for, then, I understood. I knew he was meaning you, for he knew you before. There is no other likely person, and you are all that! Any man would be mad about you. Oh, Nadia! What am I to do?"

Petal was trembling from head to foot.

Nadia was dumbfounded, and for the first time incapable of speech.

"I used to think," Petal continued, with deep, catching breaths, "that once a man married, if he was a decent sort, he couldn't love anyone but his wife. I did not understand anything about men. I don't now," came in a pitiful wail. "I did not know how people fell in love or anything. Or how to treat a man who was in love with me, so that I did all the wrong things. Why didn't they tell me before I married how to be good to Wyl? It seems, that it is all my fault, for he did love me. I know he did, and if I had been different—more 'human,' as he said—I could have made him forget any earlier love. If he loved you when you played together as children, he could still have loved me best. Only I did not know anything about the love men want. Oh, Nadia! I know I shall *die*."

"Why, Petal——!" Nadia had never in her life felt so vile and horrible. The feeling swept over her like a flood, reducing her to the level of vampires and all degraded females that prey on men for the destruction of their souls. It did not occur to her to deny anything. Lying was outside her psychology. "Do you love him, Petal?" in awed tones.

"I never knew what it was to love anyone till I lost Wyl, and now I know. Nadia! he is everything in the world to me. I would do *anything* to bring him back! I would be *anything* he wants. Oh, if you only knew how I lie awake all night crying, and being so sick and ill with fretting! My beautiful Wylber! If

he would only be good to me again, I will never be such a fool as to repulse him."

"Oh, Petal! This is dreadful! He must go back to you. He must—he *must!*"

"But he won't—I know he won't. Anyone who loves you could not look at me! I may be pretty and all that, but I am stupid. I don't understand things, and one has to understand. Not that I wouldn't try. I never tried before. Oh, if I only knew where I failed!"

After a long silence, while Petal made efforts to recover her composure, Nadia gave a little mirthless laugh and took the seat beside the unhappy little wife.

"Poor Petal!" said she, taking the girl's hand in hers. "This has been a bad muddle, but it isn't past mending. Let us talk about it. Do you mind if I smoke?" With a trembling hand she lighted a cigarette, offering none to Petal as she did not smoke "Did it never strike you, Petal, that we are all glorified animals, only with minds very much more developed to teach us understanding? Like them, we are all here to fulfil Nature's laws, only, having better brains, we use our psychology to govern those laws."

Petal blushed, for Nadia could discuss subjects that were very embarrassing.

"I have never thought about it," said she, "as such matters always seemed to me unmentionable. Mother and Mrs. Noble never mentioned anything that was too private."

"More's the pity. A little frankness does a lot of good occasionally, if the motive and treatment is clean and sound. We may not discuss it, but we can't get away from the fact that men and women are endowed by Nature—or God, if you like—with passions—like animals—that are necessary to the purpose for which we were created. It is hypocrisy to deny it. For us humans, Love glorifies it, and marriage is the crowning joy of life, for there isn't anything more beautiful and

perfect than the happiness of lovers that are married. Nature then vindicates herself—so it seems to me—by the coming of children. But, now listen to a positive truth. Not even the coming of children can keep husbands and wives in close accord so much as this mutual passion which is another expression of love. Destroy that, and the tie itself is broken and destroyed. And nothing is so shattering and devastating as coldness and unresponsiveness."

"Oh, Nadia! how can you talk like this? How do you know so much?" Petal glanced about, fearful that the doors had ears, for Nadia had a way of openly discussing these sacred subjects as though they were commonplace facts. It thrilled her to listen, though she was far too conventional to acknowledge it. "I have always thought all that so beastly!"

"Then your outlook is entirely wrong. Nature does not make mistakes. It is only beastly where there isn't true love to glorify passion. Love makes mutual passion a sort of miracle, nothing less. It's the biggest thing in life, and if you have missed it, you have missed one of Nature's miracles. Think of it and try to understand, so that when Wylber returns to you, he will never want to leave you again."

"Oh, Nadia! will he ever want to return to me if he loves you?"

Petal's innocent mind never once thought of accusing Nadia of misconduct. To her such an idea was impossible. Nadia was a lady, not one of those degraded creatures she had lately learned about. If Wylber loved Nadia, it was something for which she could not be blamed—nor Wylber. It would never have happened had she been the proper sort of wife to her husband—the sort Nadia described who—who—Petal blushed again. But she was beginning to understand, only wished that someone on the eve of her marriage had talked very plainly to her.

"If you are patient and forgiving, and don't

reproach him too much—or at all—he will be grateful, and time will do the rest. If he finds that being with me is a waste of time, I think he will be sure to get over being foolish. Try to get him back to Canada as soon as you can. That might help."

"I wonder! Somehow, I feel, as long as you live, he will always be making mental comparisons, and that's what makes me despair. Not that I mean you haven't just as much right to live as I!" she hastened to add, fearful of being misunderstood. "But there it is! I am very unfortunate."

"Never mind. There's heaps of time for matters to improve. Grow up quickly, Petal, and learn the art of being indispensable to a man."

Petal regarded Nadia in deep admiration. "Oh, Nadia, you are very patient, and so good to me! I have never cared for a girl-friend as I care for you."

"You are very generous to care for me at all, Petal," said Nadia, feeling debasd. "I don't deserve it, I assure you."

"I don't blame you, Nadia. You can't help men going silly over you. You are so clever and say things they enjoy. I don't know how you do it!"—enviously—"and wish I could learn. Anyhow," drying her eyes, "I feel so much happier for having come. And I am going to do my best to be a sport and say nothing, but just help things to come right." She smiled in wintry fashion, and confided to Nadia how she had discovered that she had fallen in love with her husband "in the right way." "It was when he showed that he had no use for me any more, that I—I—knew—that I loved him terribly."

"Let him discover that, and it will make a lot of difference."

She drove Petal home, and, on her return, spent the rest of the day in bed with her face to the wall.

III

It was after that, that Nadia made up her mind. Basingbrook was now ready to hand over to Jasper, and she was determined not to stand in Petal's light. Petal was going to have a child, and children came first. Life had beaten her, for she was, at last, made to see that love and the gratification of passion were not the chief considerations in a community of people.

Children were that. *And Petal was going to have a child!*

She had thought so much about the situation, her love for Petal's husband—his love for her—her obligation to her parents—Jasper's faith in herself—her "Duty to her Neighbour" (who was Petal), that she felt ill-balanced and incapable of handling it any more. She would wash her hands of it all, in the only way that was possible, and then things would right themselves.

Wylber telephoning, Nadia told him to be down by the willows at the bottom of the garden that evening at dusk and she would give him her final decision. All day, she walked as in a dream, no longer herself. By evening, as the rays of the sun made fantastic shadows on the lawn behind the tall elms and maples and glinted on the ripples that danced past the bank, Nadia made her way to the bower at the water's edge to find Wylber already there.

"Nadia!" he rose from the hammock to meet her, joyously, but his face fell at sight of hers, white and stricken.

"Stay there, Wylber," she said, shrinking from his touch. "I had to tell you, or you would not have believed my letters. I—I—have decided not to go away with you. I——" She could say no more for the quivering of her lips.

"Nadia!" Wylber was incapable of reply. He refused to believe his ears.

"It is true. I have thought it all out, and it cannot be done. Not by me. If I had been a different sort of girl, I might have been able to do it, but I am made so, that it would be hopeless. I should be wretched, and should wreck your happiness."

"Nadia! This is only morbidness! Don't you love me enough to trust your happiness to me?" he cried, in tragic grief.

His words inspired a thought, and Nadia leapt at it with inspiration.

"Perhaps it's that. I do not love you enough." If he accepted that solution to the problem of her breakdown, he would go away and never come again with the lure of his beauty and passion.

"I cannot believe that! You *have* loved me, Nadie! I know it. You cannot have changed!"

"I have changed," said Nadia, in dead, level tones. "I am no longer the same."

"That's a lie! Nadia!" Emboldened by the shadows in their retreat, he took her in his arms and kissed her again and again on the lips, eyes, throat. "You dare not say you do not love me."

"Listen, Wylber," said she, releasing herself, and standing apart, "you have forgotten that Petal—is—going—to be a mother. She is a funny little thing, and only just beginning to grow up. She has never loved a man in her life, and she is now awakening to the knowledge that she loves you. Stop!" as he would have interrupted her violently. "She will love you a great deal, and if you go back to her with feelings of kindness, at least, you will begin to be happy. I know it. I want you to go back to Petal."

Wylber laughed aloud, an angry light in his eyes.

"I am not a shuttlecock to be flung this way and that at a girl's bidding. God!—you, Nadia, know what

you are to me. Do you think, while you live, that any other woman could appeal to me? I never knew that a man could go stark crazy about a girl. I am that about you. You cannot back out. I refuse to resign you, Nadia! You have got to come away with me, if for no other reason than to justify the night I was here. You gave me ample proof of your love, and you are not the girl to play fast and loose. God!—what do you take me for? *I love you!* I am not trifling—playing at this sort of thing. It's my life! Men go under for less, when cast off and flung away."

"I am dreadfully sorry!" not daring to look at him lest she should weaken. "Do we ever know ourselves? I never wanted anything so much in my life, Wylber, than a promise from you to go back to Canada and never to see you again."

"Nadia!" his cry was agonizing. The reproach went to her heart.

"It is true," tremulously.

To her surprise, Wylber dropped at her feet, sobbing brokenly.

She had only once before seen a man weep, and it had melted her. The sight of Wylber, shaken with sobs, broke down her nerve, and she was rendered helpless. His arms encircling her waist, his face hidden, he cried:

"I cannot part from you! I cannot return to the old life! I am yours—yours, for life!"

She could bear no more. "Oh, Wylber!" the tears raining down, "it is just the same with me! Don't, darling! of course I love you!"

What had she done? Capitulated?

So it seemed, for the effect on him was instantaneous. He had won, and was his masterful self again, pleading, planning, urging.

With his arm round her, he led her, in the gloaming, down to the water's edge, saying that they would have to be alone to thresh it out. His punt, in the shallows

under the willows, received them, and silently they poled past the darkening lawn.

Nadia felt helpless with love and desire. In the light of a new inspiration, she told herself that no one had the right to grudge them that last meeting. It had come to that—their *last meeting*, if he but knew! The last evening for her, of love and life!

A tightness in her throat made speaking impossible, and Wylber himself showed no inclination to talk, for when the emotions are deep, words are of little value. He poled carefully and purposefully, till he came to a narrow creek which plunged into gloom beneath overhanging boughs and sheltering leaves, then laying aside the pole, he drew the punt gently inwards to conceal it deep in that sylvan retreat.

A moment later, he was beside her, chiding her lovingly.

"And you dared to say you did not love me any more! Oh, my own—my beloved!" Holding her close in his arms, his lips on hers, he made up for all the days of deprivation and longing he had been made to suffer.

It is an amazing world!

That the punt, gliding along the bank, should suddenly disappear from sight, was nobody's concern. Life on the river continued as long as the last of the afterglow lit sky and water, then gradually ceased its activities. Traffic lessened, pleasure parties dwindled away, and the peace of early night descended like an invisible pall on the once gay scene.

In the creek, sounds from the river floated to the lovers on the evening breeze, blending with the sound of their whispers of everlasting love, till the silence of the love-birds nesting in the branches above, told them it was late, and drove them homeward.

"Love me, and think of me always," Nadia cried, emotionally, for she knew, though he did not, that it was the *last time*. The last time of stolen joys! and

Wylber swore passionate oaths of lifelong fidelity that she knew could never be kept. To her, this was the end of all things. Since neither of them was strong enough to make the only obvious sacrifice, it remained to her to make one that would be final and save the need for considering any other. Once accomplished, time would be kind to her beloved, and her enemies forgive the mischief she had wrought.

While lying in Wylber's arms, pressed to his heart, she had thought it all out, and the way in which to avoid any hint of scandal, for her mother's sake.

IV

It was past the dinner-hour when Nadia slipped into the house and went straight to her rooms, looking and feeling the guilty thing she was. She did not want dinner, but an adoring maid had placed a tray of something in her room, so that she need not starve. Was her mother greatly offended at her flagrant disregard of meal-hours, and her discourtesy in neglecting to acquaint her of her plans?

However, nothing mattered now.

Lady Donithorne came up to her the moment she learned that she was in her room, her face white with anger and alarm. Nadia with a man on the river till past nine o'clock, might have meant little had it not been for the menace of Wylber's renewed intimacy with her. The shadow of the past was darkening the mother's mind, for she had no faith in her daughter.

"Was Wylber Young with you on the river, this evening?" she asked, sternly. "You were seen passing the grounds in a punt with a man. Please don't think it worth your while to lie to me."

"I have no intention of lying," said Nadia, her emotion instantly controlled. "It was Wylber."

"You can tell me that, brazenly? Petal's husband—your former boy-lover who ruined you? Nadia!—there can be only one explanation for this renewed intimacy. You know that!"

Nadia made no reply.

"Have you no defence?" cried her mother, shaking in every limb.

"No." Nadia covered her face with her hands to shut out her mother's trembling wrath. It was all so futile, if she only knew! Perhaps she would feel sorry—afterwards.

"You can tell me that? Oh, my God! are you so utterly depraved?"

"I don't know what I am—I only know that I love him. I have tried not to—I have tried to send him away—but it is useless. We seem—born for each other. To live and not belong to him is beyond my strength."

"To think that a child of mine should tell me this! That I should have bred a degenerate—a harlot!"

"Oh, no!—no!—I am not that—never! There is a great difference—oh, Mother, surely you can see it?"

"A difference? You have come between husband and wife—like any harlot—for your sake, he is an adulterer!—and my daughter!—this will kill me. What would your father do?—what say?"

"It has all come out of parting me from Jasper," said Nadia. "Only he could have saved this. Oh, Jasper!—Jasper!—you wonderful, pitiful saint of God!"

"You blame me for your evil instincts! I should turn you out of my house for this. You are bent on disgracing us all—oh, far better had you died in your childhood!"

Yet there was no guarantee that things would not go from bad to worse if she turned Nadia out. Wylber

would follow her or she would go away with him!—and then, what a dreadful scandal for the newspapers to spread like wildfire! The beautiful daughter of Lord Donithorne, ex-Governor of—oh, it was unthinkable! Nadia was thoroughly independent of her parents, financially, because her silly old aunt-godmother had omitted to safeguard the money till the child was of age. Thus, Nadia could walk out of the house at any time she pleased, and bring disgrace on her people.

Something would have to be done quickly, thought Lady Donithorne. It might even be necessary, a second time, to cover up the depraved girl's misdoings. What had occasioned such depravity, she could not imagine!

Looking at her daughter, face buried in the pillows and moaning softly to herself, she began to regret having postponed speaking to Jasper of Nadia's danger. She had so hoped that his return into her life would, of itself do wonders in changing the girl's outlook; but things had gone too far for that, now. She was sufficiently a woman of the world to know that once an obsession of the sort possessed lovers, no parent or beloved guardian could have any influence to stay the inevitable.

Still, as a drowning man clutches at straws, she clutched at the hope that Jasper would come to the rescue and work a miracle.

"I'll see you in the morning, Nadia," said she, stiffly, moving towards the door. "This matter has got to be faced and settled definitely."

"Oh, Mother! say good-bye before you go!" cried Nadia, the tears streaming down her cheeks. "Say you forgive me—say good-bye!"

"Good night," said her mother, freezingly, feeling that it was as well to make some concessions if her daughter was to be brought to her senses. What did she mean by good-bye, when it was good night? Woolgathering, no doubt.

Lady Donithorne closed the door behind her, and

made her way to the telephone, thankful that her husband was out of earshot in his study, concocting a speech for a coming dinner in the city. She did not wish him to hear her calling Jasper to the house at that late hour, for he would wonder what had happened.

"Is that the boarding-house? Oh, may Lady Donithorne speak to Mr. Jasper Noble?"

"Mr. Noble is away for the week-end," came the reply.

"Oh—then please let him know the moment he is back, that Lady Donithorne would like to see him on a matter of the greatest importance."

She hung up the receiver, feeling oppressed with forebodings, and retired to bed. What did mothers do when their young daughters were on the brink of committing irretrievable folly?—worse—oh, infinitely worse than that! How had it happened? Whose was the blame? . . . Perhaps it would be best, after all, to tell her father in the morning—but, then, he would be furious at having been kept in the dark so long! No. Lady Donithorne decided that she could never tell her husband, now. It was too late. Jasper was the right person to deal with the situation, for Nadia loved him dearly, and valued his opinion above all others in the world.

▼

Nadia was glad to think that all the formalities with regard to the transfer of the farm to Jasper's name and possession, were concluded, and that nothing remained but to write and tell him of his good fortune. Dear Jasper! The one gleam of brightness in the grey gloom of her mind was the thought of the gladness of his surprise and how happily she was lifting the burdens weighing on his brave shoulders. She was thankful from the bottom of her heart that God had given her

the chance to pay part of the great debt she owed to her beloved Bruno.

It was altogether a wonderful thing to think how merciful God was, for, at least, she could bank on His pity and forgiveness. He knew, exactly, the measure of her weakness, for her human nature was of His making. Therefore she was confident that, whoever might not, God would make allowances for her failure to do the right thing by Petal and "play the game."

She sat down to write to Jasper, the tears raining down, for it was going to be good-bye—a long good-bye, and he would be cut to the heart. Not only at the parting, but for all that had led up to the necessity for it. She wanted him to know the whole truth, as in old days, when there was nothing she ever hid from him. He was more like a mother to her than her own mother, if that were possible in a man.

Thus, she began her long letter, laying bare her heart to him:

> "Darling Bruno (who like Christ can pity and forgive),—I have been mad, recently, and am, probably, mad now, for I seem to have lost all power to fight the evil forces within me. I am a traitor to friendship, for which there is no censure too great; and I am heading for disaster—even glorying in sin. When I tell you that Wylber is in London and married to my old friend, Petal, you will understand; for we love each other beyond reason.
>
> "It has come to this: I am not really fit to live, so I am quitting. When people become a stumbling-block to others, they are better dead. Forgive me if this sounds like cowardice. I cannot carry on, Bruno darling, for if I live, I know I shall hate myself in the end.
>
> "If I had never been parted from you, my beloved guardian-angel, things might have been

different to-day. Your strength helped my weakness. It is, however, too late, now. When we met in town I did not tell you that Wylber was here for very fear of your certain interference. So you can understand from that to what I have fallen. I knew I was doing wrong, and yet——

"Things are very different from that time at Basingbrook, when I was really innocent of harm, and injured no one but myself, and, indeed, there is no excuse for me but the one of 'loving too much'—and my human weakness!

"You always knew how it would be if ever Wylber came back! Before I tell you of all my struggles, my efforts that ended in failure, so that you might pity and forgive, I must tell you first of the one big thing that has given me a measure of happiness, and that is, the gift I have been preparing for you. Bruno—the purchaser of Basingbrook Farm is *Nadia Donithorne*. She kept the secret well, for she bought it for you, and till everything was complete, she did not want you to know. Now it only remains for you to move in and take possession. My lawyers will communicate with you, for there is now nothing left to be done. This is my token of love and gratitude for all you have done for me in the past. Think of me always, and love me as always, though I have proved myself utterly unworthy."

Nadia wrote far into the night, feeling the relief it was to pour out her heart to Jasper. In one place, she said:

"I know I am grieving you dreadfully, but remember it will mean a great peace for me, and God knows it is the only way."

Exhaustion accounted for the way Nadia slept that night. For the first time, soundly and dreamlessly, till

the dawn crept in and told that she was on the threshold of a new day. The feeling that her mind was made up had given her a sense of security and satisfaction that no natural shrinking from the Unknown could take away. When a matter is definitely and unalterably settled, it breeds calm and confidence.

As the new day revealed itself, it seemed that Nature smiled approval on her decision, for her plans were considerately made so that her going should take place naturally, and no one dream that the only daughter of Lord and Lady Donithorne had committed suicide. She wanted to avoid creating scandal which her mother always dreaded. It would be mistaken by the world for an accident, and Jasper's letter which she would herself post to his address, would be sacred to himself.

When she was dressed, a maid, who was laying the cloth for breakfast, appeared surprised to see her down so early, and dressed for the river. Would she like an early breakfast? No. Nadia had no use for breakfast, and smiled so sweetly, that the maid thought she looked very lovable and pretty.

"It's a nice day for the river, Miss. I don't blame you wanting to make the most of it."

"It is lovely," said Nadia, going out to post her letter. A pillar-box outside the gate was handy, and after dropping the letter into it, she made her way down to the water's edge. There was a dew on the lawn, she noticed, and a new crop of dandelions to annoy the gardeners. One of them met her at the bottom of the lawn, and accompanied her to the boat-house.

"Fine day, Miss. Can't beat it for the river."

"It is nice. I thought I'd make the most of it."

When he saw it was the small canoe she was taking out, he thought it was well to warn her.

"Them cockleshells ain't no trusting, Miss. They capsizes if you look at 'em."

"I can swim," said she, comfortingly.

" Sit down quick and don'tcher move," said he, as she stepped in and pushed out. " Steady—steady ! " he called, as it swayed dangerously. " A punt would be more safer," said he. But Nadia showed she could handle the little boat, and was soon out of sight round the bend in the river.

The brightness of the day brought many pleasure-boats out even at that early hour, and bathers were already disporting themselves in the water near the opposite bank. Nadia paused to watch them, the joyousness of boys and girls at play, being a delightful thing to see.

While so engaged, a voice accosted her from a boat which was drifting slowly past on the tide, the sole occupant resting on his oars.

" You are very lonely," said he, with a twinkle in his eye. " So am I. Let's join company and have a topping time. The day's quite young."

Turning, Nadia saw a young man in college colours, gazing insinuatingly at her.

" Thank you," she retorted. " Why should I, if I prefer my own society ? "

" That's very unsociable of you ! Think over it. I can take your boat in tow."

" You are very kind, but I'm perfectly content."

" Nothing doing—what ? " he grinned, and rowed on.

She had wasted so much time that she was sure her parents were, by now, having breakfast. The sun, too, was mounting steadily.

A little higher up, the river was wider in one part, and Nadia kept well amidstream. A motor-boat, rushing past with foam and spray, created waves that nearly submerged her small craft, yet she kept it afloat lest interfering people from the hurrying thing should try to save her life were they to see her sinking.

Presently, she seemed to have the river to herself, but for the bathers far away and a steam launch puffing

up the river with two barges in tow, too far away to be any hindrance to her.

It was very easy to capsize a skiff—so easy, that it did not need thinking about for more than a few seconds. Bathers by the bank saw it suddenly tip over . . . the girl must have been trying to change her position—anyway, it was no time for theorizing; several strong swimmers made hand over hand to the spot; others on shore screamed and yelled for help; the steam launch came puffing laboriously on; a *dingi* was being paddled furiously out . . .

But it does not take long to get drowned.

THE END

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